

# The Fire of Spring

Margaret Potter

A very faint, light gray watermark-style illustration of a classical building with four columns and a triangular pediment occupies the background of the page.

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"DO YOU WANT TO HAVE MURDER DONE HERE, IN  
THE HOUSE?"

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# *The FIRE of* SPRING

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*By*

MARGARET POTTER

AUTHOR OF

"UNCANONIZED," "THE HOUSE OF DE MAILLY," "ISTAR OF BABYLON,"  
"THE CASTLE OF TWILIGHT," "THE FLAME-GATHERERS," ETC.

*Illustrated by*

SYDNEY ADAMSON



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THE THREE H'S

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## CHAPTER I

IN 1895, seven years before the new Annex brought the Pompeian room into existence, there were, in Chicago, three or four popular resorts frequented by that small, but lucrative class of men who make a practice of knowing certain unclassed sides of city life. Of these places, none was more popular than the Wellington bar: the ante-chamber, accessible from Jackson street, to the sacred precincts of private dining-rooms on the second floor of the hotel. In this large, square room, at noon, on the fourteenth day of March, there was a crowd larger than usual, drawn to conviviality perhaps by the vivid sunshine outside and the hint of spring in the boisterous West wind. Round the bar there was the usual loud talk of La Salle street and the Board. But the subjects under discussion at the tables, were handled in discreeter fashion. For instance, in the corner nearest the hotel entrance, sat three men, two of whom, glass in hand, were drinking the health of the third, whose engagement had been announced that morning.

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Charles Van Studdiford did not, perhaps, present the figure of the ideal lover. He was a man somewhere between the ages of thirty-five and forty; but the bald height of his forehead added five years or more to his appearance. The hair that began thinly at his temples and ran back to a thick fringe was of a reddish hue, reappearing three shades lighter in his close-cut mustache. He had an air of extreme neatness in his dress; but his features were unremarkable. The eyes were of a pale blue, almost watery, indeed; and few people knew that they could, when he wished it so, gaze very keenly, very deeply, into others. Nor was his figure one to attract attention, being short and stocky. And not many paused to reflect that that figure had been known, on occasions, to assume a dominant poise.

One person, however, might be supposed to have noticed these good points, and any others there might be. For Charles Van Studdiford was certainly engaged. It had been the prize of the morning's society columns, which dilated at length upon the prospective union of position with wealth. It had been under discussion at many breakfast-tables. And now, here, in the heart of the "City," it rivalled in interest the new advance in May wheat. Charles Van Studdiford, the great plow-manufacturer of Grangeford, the many times millionaire, to marry Virginia Merrill: a girl scarcely out of school, with two years of "teens" still to be gone through; the daughter of a man once wealthy, but broken some time since on the wheel of speculative commerce that rolls so swiftly in this western Babylon. Charles Van Studdiford

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and Virginia Merrill! Many a Mother sighed as she linked the names. If any one had ever imagined that the man would prove susceptible, (and to that child!) the race had probably not been run alone.

Van Studdiford sat at his table in the Wellington bar and smiled in some embarrassment as he acknowledged the toast of his friends. But he was, whatever his color, very well pleased with himself to-day. The last hour had seen the end of a disagreeable affair, which had been awaiting a conclusion for some weeks. Muriel Howard knew at last that she was permanently dismissed. At the end she had not behaved so badly. And now Charles was entirely free to devote himself earnestly to the little girl whose young, undeveloped dignities and vanities had so mystified and captivated him. As, dispelling the surrounding scene, he sat recapitulating the past, it pleased him to think that no one who had known his man's life could so much as suspect a certain side of him recently brought to light: that soft and tender, gently credulous side, in one who was always so much the man of business, the practical money-getter; who liked to drive a close bargain in affairs of the heart, as well as on the Board of Trade: the burly manufacturer, in whom, beside his factory, fine horses had been the one other approachable interest. This was the man who was engaged to Virginia Merrill.

As a matter of fact, at that very moment his two companions, both Chicagoans, and simply business acquaintances, were speculating vaguely on the self-same thing. Was it really possible that Charles Van Studdiford could

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be in love—with a girl? with a young girl, of gentle birth and highest breeding, as unassailable by the coarser methods as the women Charles had hitherto known would have been by the finer? Muriel Howard had, of course, never been wondered about. She was rather a *sine qua non*.

The whiskey was finished. The conversation lapsed. Clearly some change must be made. As a preparatory signal, Van Studdiford looked at his watch. But by this act his idea received a check. It was only twenty minutes past twelve. There was more than half an hour still to be consumed—somehow. He snapped his fingers at a waiter.

"Come,—have another. Yours, George?"

"Rye, straight, and a Lithia chaser."

"And yours?" indicating the second.

"Let me have some Irish whis——"

"Oh!" broke in Charles, suddenly rising. "Atkinson! I didn't know you'd come in town to-day!"

The others looked up, with pleasure in their faces. Philip Atkinson was shaking hands with his cousin—and employer. Afterwards he greeted the other two and sat down in the vacant chair. The order was finished with the addition of two cocktails; and then, instinctively, all three turned to the newcomer.

Atkinson was smiling, agreeably, indulgently, at his cousin. He was supposed to be at the factory in Grangeford, attending to his work: mysterious work, that changed frequently, as he tried first one branch and then another of Van Studdiford's great system. But he was perfectly willing to overlook Charles' stupidity in imag-

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ining that he ought to be in any place rather than another in this great, vastly interesting world. In fact, Charles was already feeling apologetic for his momentary annoyance, as Philip very well knew. The other two men looked to him frankly for salvation from boredom. So he smiled again, and began to talk.

Atkinson!—Atkinson! Describe him? Who shall do it? Who ever perfectly comprehended the wondrous vagaries of his mind? the rare talents chaotically crossed in him? the poetry? the instability? the brilliance that too often became mere effervescence? above all, over all, that subtle, indefinable fascination, that quivered from him like an aura, which men could no more escape than women wished to? He was perfectly irresponsible. He was even perfectly untrustworthy, though of this he was entirely unaware. Long ago his two brothers, Leslie and James, sober, hard-working, patiently industrious men, had given up any hope of molding or restraining him. They were glad to relinquish him to the passionate affection of their sister, Madame Dupré, who in many ways resembled Philip, and to the tolerance of Van Studdiford, their cousin, from whose employ he had been three times discharged, and to which, after an interview or two, he had been as often taken back.

Even through the lapse of years Atkinson cannot be truly estimated. His fascination veils him still, dims the faultiness, gives the whole a deceptive beauty.

All this, however, was Philip in the aggregate. Seated at a table in the Wellington bar, intent upon as many cocktails as could be decently consumed in the half-

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hour at his disposal, his romantic qualities were not, perhaps, so apparent, whatever the picture he presented. Certainly he was handsome: remarkably so, with his smooth-shaven, clear-cut face, his dark hair, with the irrepressible wave in it; his lustrous gray eyes, shaded by the blackest of lashes; and the mouth in which there was, unaccountably, no smallest suggestion of weakness or sensuality. When he talked, his face took on a kind of bright boyishness. When he was silent or abstracted, his thirty-three years came out and stood upon his face, making him, to those who did not know him well, look strangely old:—old with an age not so much of time as of bad living. But for those who liked him, this malevolent apparition was never visible. It was lost in—fascination.

At the moment he was smiling, delightedly, into his cousin's florid face: making his congratulations in a manner just a little spoiled by an habitual affectation. But nobody could have guessed that he was chagrined at having heard of Van Studdiford's engagement that morning for the first time, through the columns of the *Tribune*.

"Well, old chap, it's delightful! How did you do it so quietly—eh? I hadn't an idea of it. Never seen her, but she's charming, of course." (The cocktail disappeared.) "You are certainly the—Oh! Fritz!—Really, that was too bad.—Fritz! another dry Martini, and take these gentlemen's orders.—Why, Charlie, I forgot your health!"

Van Studdiford smiled, indulgently. What a boy he was!—But shortly the other two men, having finished their third drink, rose, shook hands, and departed toward

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luncheon. At the same time Van Studdiford again took out his watch.

"Philip, I'm to meet Mrs. and Miss Merrill at the Annex, at one, for luncheon. Will you make a fourth? I'd like to have you see Miss Merrill."

"Thank you very much. Really I—um—ah—I shall be delighted, thank you." As a matter of fact, Philip had another engagement. At this moment, upstairs, in dining-room "S," a young lady sat impatiently awaiting him. But Philip was really desirous of seeing Van Studdiford's fiancée; and—Marcia could wait. She always accepted his excuses—eventually.

So the two paid their respective checks, each tipping the smiling Fritz, and started on their short walk down Michigan Avenue to the Annex. The sun was bright, the wind high and warm, and Philip's spirits rose. It was good to be free from work. It was good to be away from dull little Grangeford, even for a day. More. It was good to be alive, to have cocktails to drink, women to wait for one! It was—

"Phil," remarked his companion, dolefully puffing at a cigar, "I've got to go with 'em to the Thomas concert after luncheon.—Woman's trick!—Won't you come along too? In the intermission, you know, we can get out, together."

"Oh, too bad, Charlie, but really I can't. I'm very sorry, really. Be charming, I'm sure—um—" He couldn't help a faint smile—"but I have an engagement that I oughtn't to break. Got to see Ferguson about that ore, you know—"

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"I've made arrangements to attend to that to-night," returned Van Studdiford, shortly. "But of course you needn't go. Don't excuse yourself."

Atkinson was annoyed. He disliked discountenance above all things. It took a moment or two for him to recover himself. But after that he chatted, amiably, till they turned in at the Michigan Avenue entrance of the Annex.

It was already five minutes to one; and Van Studdiford hurried off to secure a table and order the luncheon, meantime leaving his cousin to watch for the ladies at the door. Philip had never met either of them, but he knew Mrs. Merrill very well by sight, and lounged about the pillars near the elevator quite contentedly for a minute or two. Then, however, he perceived a man whom he knew. Two more cocktails were in prospect; and when Van Studdiford came back at three minutes past one, Atkinson was nowhere to be seen. The disappearance, however, was so in accordance with Philip's habits, that the host was not in the least surprised; and, the ladies having not yet arrived, he seated himself in one of the great chairs by the door, to wait. Five minutes more went by. Then, as Atkinson reappeared from the direction of the bar, Mrs. Merrill and her daughter came in from the Avenue.

There was a moment of greetings with Charles. Afterwards, instinctively, the three turned to Atkinson, who had withdrawn a little to the right.

Van Studdiford made a formal introduction. Philip found himself bowing profoundly before a slight, pretty woman, with evenly waved white hair, gowned in the most unobtrusive style, carrying that gown as only women of

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station can. She murmured a conventional word or two, and then herself presented her daughter, with whom Philip shook hands absent-mindedly, while he surveyed her: his cousin's fiancée. He was still occupied in this way when they started toward the dining-room, it being most natural that Van Studdiford should go first, with Mrs. Merrill, his cousin following with the young girl.

Atkinson knew at once that Charles had ground for his infatuation, though he had not as yet marked details. Women were the paramount interest in Philip's life. He cared for them and studied them as other men care for and study their professions. He loved them all, because they were women. All his life he had shown his interest in them. And Virginia Merrill pleased him immediately. Although, to most men, she would, at this time, have been merely a delight to the eye, his senses were acute enough to perceive other qualities in her—qualities of temperament and mind. To him, there was already much of interest behind the young face and constrained manner.

The arrangement at table was highly satisfactory. Virginia was on Atkinson's right, with a window opposite her, behind her Mother, and a strong light thrown across her face. During the canapé she was studied covertly, and much was perceived. First of all, she was beautifully dressed. That, of course, was her Mother. The Merrills, every one knew, were extremely poor; but that was considered no reason why the women of the family should be badly clothed. To-day Virginia was in brown. From the crown of her feather toque to the tip

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of her suède shoes, all was one harmonious range of color. Her bright brown hair gleamed red and gold in the sunlight. Her large eyes were hazel, when one got a straight look under the extraordinarily long lashes. And the delicate pallor of her face, the deep ecru of her lace waist, the slender gold chain, with its dull gold ornament, that hung about her neck, and the tan of purse and gloves which she had laid aside, formed a series of tones that delighted Atkinson's artistic soul. He was very glad that he had come. Marcia presented no such noon-tide attractions. It only remained now to make her speak: this not for the trend of her thoughts, but for the tone of her voice,—to see whether that, too, would blend with the whole. At present, Mrs. Merrill was sustaining the brunt of the conversation; but Philip waited a proper cue, and then, leaning over a little, addressed the young girl directly, with that too personal manner which had, again and again, proved irresistible to women.

"And so you are engaged to be married.—And to my cousin.—Don't you think he might have told me himself, a little sooner than—he did?" Atkinson had come near betraying that he had not been told at all; and this was a faux pas which he did not care to make before Mrs. Merrill.

Virginia hesitated for a moment, lifted her eyes for a short, rather tantalizing glance, and then smiled. "It was only announced this morning, you know," she ventured, demurely enough, but unable to keep the gleam of her young delight out of her eyes.

Atkinson read her very accurately. Her voice was

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musical, and her enunciation prettily cultivated. She was a delightful little girl. And he smiled, faintly, as he perceived how broadly she was displaying the great solitaire on her left hand. Obedient to her wish, his eyes rested upon it, and his look expressed admiration, though he inwardly regretted that, for the sake of her costume, it was not a topaz.

" You've been in Cuba this winter, haven't you?" she went on, presently.

" Yes.—How did you know it?" he answered, still with a faint smile, and with so much open interest in her that a little color crept up her transparent face.

" Oh—Mr. Van Studdiford" (this was not affectation; she could not say " Charles") " told me. That is why I didn't meet you when I stayed with Marion Hunt, in January. I was in Grangeford for three weeks, you know. And I didn't go back to school after the holidays because——"

" Virginia," murmured her Mother.

The waiter wished to remove the bouillon, and Virginia's spoon was still in her hand: she had been playing with it while she talked. Atkinson looked away, at once, interested at the adroitness with which the child's Mother had stopped confidences. The plate was removed, and Van Studdiford took up the conversation. Nor, throughout the meal, did Atkinson return to his first position. He had made his test, and come to his conclusion. She was a little too pliable. He preferred his wax a trifle harder to mold.

Luncheon progressed, agreeably. Van Studdiford had

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made no mistakes in his menu ; and the wine, (that which, on the list, is called Johannisburg), was smooth enough and mild enough even for Virginia, who sipped the golden liquid with a girlish ecstasy at her own importance, that was pretty to watch.

And, indeed, it would have been remarkable had Virginia Merrill, being herself, not been happy to-day. At this moment, she was the most interesting object in society. She, who had, hitherto, been guarded from the world as if it had been a devouring monster, was now, in one breath, thrust into the very midst of life, with the prospect of having to crowd all the dear delights of débutantism, experienced young-ladyhood, and the more important status of the engaged girl, into the eleven short weeks that preceded her wedding. Across the table sat the man who had made it all possible :—florid, beaming Van Studdiford, too entirely in love with her to understand many things that cried to be understood, leaving all the necessary tutoring of the child to a Mother who, with a pierced heart in her breast, was selling her daughter to save her from what she herself had had to endure. Charles Van Studdiford was enormously wealthy. That was enough. Anything, anything in the world, in the eyes of Caroline Merrill, must be preferable to just that species of well-dressed poverty that she had struggled with for the past five years. And as for love—what should Virginia want to know of it for years to come ? When she did learn—she would be sufficiently well-schooled to grapple with it successfully. And as these things passed through Mrs. Merrill's mind for the hundredth time, how should she be

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aware that her last question had also been asked, impersonally, by another who sat at that same table?

They had reached dessert before the matter of the concert came up. Mrs. Merrill had a box for the season. (Each year she managed that; no one knew how.) And now she asked Atkinson to be of the party this afternoon. Philip refused, gracefully; his excuse being much more convincing than that he had given Van Studdiford, some time ago. A little to his surprise, Virginia turned to him with disinterested reproach in her manner:

"Why do men never want to hear good music? It is such a fine program to-day. You wouldn't find it heavy, and you couldn't help liking some of it. There's the Unfinished Symphony. It is the best—well, the most distinctive, the most truly Schubert, of anything Thomas plays. And the 'Ruet d'Omphale,'—ah, that is—delicious!"

Mrs. Merrill smiled, indulgently. "My dear, you must not try to carry Mr. Atkinson away on your own enthusiasm. His taste for Saint-Saëns has probably been modified, as yours will some time be."

To Philip, this comment was more or less Greek. So far as he knew, he had never heard any Saint-Saëns at all. But he was sorry that Virginia had been cut off in her little flight; and he was glad to perceive that she had a talent. Without a talent, no woman was, in his eyes, quite complete. Some day—when she was more experienced—she would be a worthy field of exploration for an artist—like himself. But, for the moment, Marcia lay rather heavily on his mind. Women were so often unreasonable. It was high time he found her.

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The chairs were pushed back. Van Studdiford rose reluctantly, the ladies with some eagerness; for it was late. Wraps were not donned, since they were going through the tunnel into the Auditorium proper. At the door of the dining-room, Mrs. Merrill put out her hand to Atkinson.

"It is a pleasure to have met you.—I have known your sister for a long time; and you are like her."

"Thank you. That is a very great compliment," he replied, quietly.

Virginia also turned to him. "Good-bye," she said. "I wish you were coming to the concert."

He bowed, deeply, over her hand, but said nothing. In another moment they had separated.

Atkinson left the hotel, and returned at a brisk walk to the Wellington. Probably Marcia was there still. He was only two hours late for his engagement; and that was really not so very much. Three or four compliments,—perhaps a kiss—pooh!—As he walked, he hummed a little tune: an air the words of which had pleased him so much on first hearing that it had become his motif. In reality, it was a perfect little synopsis of his own character: Gounod's "*Chantez, Riez, Dormez.*" He sang it now, very softly: "*Quand tu dors, bercée le soir, entre mes bras,*" and the picture of the woman thus enfolded, was a new one, and over-daring.

Re-entering the Wellington bar, only for a moment before going upstairs, he was caught by a party of old-time companions, forced into a chair at a table, and asked what he would have. As Fritz rushed away with

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the order, one of the men, Jack Kennard by name, turned to him:

"Saw you, Phil, going into the Annex with Van Studiford. Did you meet his girl?"

"I had the pleasure," returned Atkinson, "of lunching with my cousin, and Mrs. and Miss Merrill."

Somebody laughed. Then came a chorus: "What's she like, Phil?" These men were not of the Merrill set.

"She is charming. Charlie is to be congratulated.—Charming, really!"

Nor was anything more to be got out of him. Yet he was himself surprised at the impression left by that little girl. It stayed with him all day, and rather spoiled his evening—with Marcia. Yet perhaps that was only because her young eyes were so very brown, so very clear, so innocent.

## CHAPTER II

THE Merrill house, a very large one, built of gray stone, was on Michigan Avenue, in the neighborhood of Thirtieth Street. It was a beautiful home ; for it had been built at a time when John Merrill's realities were almost as big as his prospects ; and it had been designed to hold more of a family than the one little daughter remaining of three children. Virginia was eighteen now ; and it did not seem so long ago that luxuries at home and extravagances abroad had been encouraged by both parents. Since the day, however, five years before, of an unsuccessful attempt to corner lard, the mode of life of the Merrill family had changed, materially. Mrs. Merrill retained her maid ; and she and her daughter dressed with all the taste natural to both of them. But the stables were closed ; and a good many rooms on the upper floors of the house were dismantled and locked—to save cleaning, redecorating, and care. Servants were the greatest problem in the household, for they had to be paid ; whereas dressmakers and markets could be indefinitely put off. In the morning, the ladies took their tea and toast in bed, and John Merrill ate an egg and drank a little coffee before he went disconsolately off to his remnant of work in the city. He could usually get an invitation to luncheon at his club ; and his wife rarely took her mid-

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day meal at home. As for dinner—the Merrills gave two or three elaborate entertainments a month during the season; and, in return, were asked out three or four nights a week. This was far less expensive than not entertaining at all,—provided, only, one knew how to make everything go very far.

Such, for five weary years, had been the spirit of existence in that household:—every burden finding a place on Mrs. Merrill's capable, but tired shoulders. And now, at last, the reward of the long struggle had, most unexpectedly, come. Without the expense of a last year at a finishing school, the ruinous season of the *débutante*, and perhaps two years more of resolute appearances before a suitable match could be found, Virginia was to marry a good name and a huge fortune, without even the encumbrance of a family attached. For, with the exception of one sister, Van Studdiford had no relatives nearer than cousins. After June, then, there would be a great freedom for Mrs. Merrill. She could carry her failing husband to Europe in the summer, to the South in the winter, and, by renting the town house, make their income ample for their simplified needs. Life's shadows were serene now, and she could look forward to them without any of the old weariness, the dreaded necessity of keeping up appearances. Unquestionably, Virginia was a good daughter. The great coup had really been of her own making; or, rather, had been the unforeseen result of an accidental visit to a school-friend. And now, through the three important months of courtship, she promised perfect behavior, engendered, as, alas! the Mother knew, by a perfect

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ignorance of those joyful deeps that she should be exploring. All being done, however, the first shock of relief at an end, and the prospective son-in-law constantly in evidence, Mrs. Merrill found moments of unforeseen discouragement and many details in the situation that were not to her taste. Indeed, so devoted was she to Virginia's interests, that she had begun to long, earnestly, for the impossibly perfect: love and wealth united. But the fact that delicate Virginia as yet showed not the faintest desire for the first of these, must be, at present, her Mother's greatest comfort.

All in all, Virginia was, just now, radiantly happy. Her undeveloped tendencies were worldly enough; and to find herself suddenly the pivot on which the entire household revolved, an object of keen interest to the very servants, had turned her head a little. Her wishes were consulted about everything. She was learning the pleasure of planning new gowns, of ordering, at this place and that, the thousand pretty details of her trousseau. It was to be complete; for her Father had allowed almost a year's income for her equipment, taking a half-sorrowful pride in sending her to her millionaire husband in need of no extravagance that could be desired. She even rose to the dignity of a maid of her own, who, though she was not to be allowed to accompany the bride on her wedding trip, would follow her to Grangeford on her return, and begin the new life there with her. Lucy Markle was an English girl, an adept in her profession, possessed of the foreign tendency toward becoming personally attached to her mistress. Virginia began to take a keen interest in her own

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individuality; for Lucy Markle soon brought out her every effective point, and gave her an air of distinction remarked by many people outside of her immediate circle.

The engagement had been announced on the evening of the thirteenth of March. The wedding day was set for Wednesday, the fourth of June, the ceremony to be performed in Grace Church, at noon, a breakfast following at the house. And on the same evening the bridal couple were to leave for New York, whence they should sail, on Saturday, for Europe: the land of Virginia's desire and dreams.

After the announcement of her engagement, the bride-elect lost no time in selecting her maids:—six girls of representative families, who were permitted to appear at a conspicuous function before their respective débuts because Mrs. Merrill's daughter asked it, and because Mrs. Merrill's daughter was making a remarkable match. Most of these young girls were away at their finishing schools; and Virginia was thus denied one part of her legitimate pleasure: that of having constantly around her a train of admiring, flattering, envying attendants, who would entertain her, early and late, and to whom, from the depths of her vast ignorance, she could chatter at will, finding her audience always interested, always credulous. But each of the six promised to be at home at least ten days before the great event, for the important purpose of having their gowns tried on the requisite number of times. And till that period arrived Virginia must be content with one companion—the seventh of her company, the maid of honor, Marion Hunt, at whose home

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in Grangeford Van Studdiford had met and fallen in love with his childlike fiancée.

In the previous year these two girls had been room-mates at a fashionable New York school: Virginia's first year being Marion's last. At that time there had sprung up between them one of those strangely violent affections which make a dangerous episode in a girl's school-life. This particular friendship happened to be less unhealthy than the majority of such cases; and the head of the school, judiciously perceiving that Marion Hunt's common sense was having the best influence on little Miss Merrill's butterfly wilfulness, made no effort to check it. Next year, Marion was no longer at Miss Burden's; and, after the Christmas holidays, Virginia's Mother, for the old, dreary reason, had found it inexpedient to call her daughter home. What more natural than that white-faced Virginia should be found "not quite strong enough to go back to her studies"? And, also, what more natural than that, not going back, she should delightedly have accepted Mrs. Hunt's cordial invitation to come and partake of the fresh air and mild society of Grangeford, Illinois? But, in regard to the great conclusion of that visit, what more wholly unexpected than that Charles Van Studdiford, the king of the little city, the ignorer of women, the lover of fine horses, should have fallen so precipitately, so hopelessly in love with the dainty, childish creature, who, when she perceived his infatuation, was all too keenly aware of the value of it? This was what happened; and March found the destinies of Virginia Merrill settled, to all intents and purposes, for good.

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Perhaps in no country in the world is the period immediately preceding marriage so incongruously occupied as in the land of the epitome of civilization: the United States. The one thing that is to be rigidly guarded against, is any revelation to the young girl of the grim essentials of real life. The thing to be steadfastly avoided, is any sacred communion between Mother and daughter, any beautiful and tender explanations and teachings about the meaning and the necessities of the new state. And the one thing desired is to keep the prospective bride occupied, morning, noon and night, with the most frivolous thoughts and the most useless pursuits.

Virginia Merrill was just as innocent, just as ignorant of that knowledge without which no woman ought ever to marry, as her family and her friends supposed and desired her to be. Her mind and her sensibilities were, perhaps, more than usually refined. At the merest suggestion of anything bordering on vulgarity, she shrank, helplessly, within herself. And, never once having had it suggested to her to consider the seriousness of the step she was taking, she had not dreamed of contemplating it for herself. Indeed, not once, from the hour of her engagement, did she allow her thoughts to dwell upon the details of her approaching married life. Impossible? No. When all the hitherto precluded joys of vanity and importance are thrown pell-mell at the feet of a very young woman, why should she desire to turn her thoughts from them to unpleasant responsibilities and duties? It was at the altar of Grace Church, after all the congregation had seen the exquisite fit of her wedding gown, the perfect hang of

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the court train, that Virginia's mind stopped. Beyond stretched a great, grave blank.

Van Studdiford, of course, was constantly in evidence. He made an unexpectedly good lover. He showered her with gifts; he deluged her with questions as to what else she would like; he overwhelmed her with tacit promises. In April he took her and her Mother to Grangeford, to see what changes she might wish made for herself in his house there. But it was Mrs. Merrill who decided on the arrangement of Virginia's own apartments. Two small rooms were to be thrown together for her bed-chamber; and a boudoir to be constructed beyond this that would also open directly into the room to be occupied by Lucy Markle, her maid. Both ladies were delighted with the comfortable house, the ten acres of beautifully kept grounds, and the immense stables. As she was conducted from one thing to another, Mrs. Merrill's heart grew light within her. After all, what an excellent arrangement this marriage was! The one thing marring the prospect in the slightest way, was the presence of Miss Van Studdiford, a slight, red-haired, severe-looking woman, who could scarcely be called a desirable adjunct to the place. Virginia must, however, meet this difficulty as gracefully as possible, and let circumstances decide the outcome of a situation that Mrs. Merrill perceived would speedily become difficult. Virginia herself gave no sign of apprehension. She was not trying to imagine her future in this house.

Atkinson was not encountered during this visit; nor did Virginia see him again until the night of the wedding

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rehearsal, to which he came, of course, being one of his cousin's ushers. Nor did Philip, contrary to his own nature, concern himself very much about the future mistress of his employer's home. After his hour of interest in her at the Annex luncheon, she had slipped out of his calculations, displaced by more engrossing topics. If she did cross his mind at all, it was merely in the light of some one who was to give him a highly disagreeable summer. For he was to be left at the Grangeford factory during Van Studdiford's absence in Europe on the first real vacation the owner had had in six years.

Once, in the last four weeks of her girl life, Virginia thought of Atkinson; but only in connection with his sister Georgiana, Mme. Dupré, the widow of a celebrated French painter. Mrs. Merrill had known this fascinating woman for many years; and took delight in entertaining her when she happened to be in Chicago on one of her rare visits to her three brothers. The time had not yet come when Georgiana's love of unconventionality had put her slightly beyond the pale of her old, exclusive set. And whenever she was in America she was the sensation of the hour among the best people of two cities.

On a Sunday in the middle of May, the day before she left for New York, en route for Paris, Mme. Dupré lunched with the Merrills; and Virginia straightway fell in love with her. As a matter of fact, she was one of the most beautiful women of her time; and, though well aware of her every attraction, she used that knowledge only to the best advantage. Virginia soon perceived her

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strong likeness to the youngest of her brothers; but thought Mme. Dupré far more delightful than he.

That afternoon, Virginia was having an informal *exposition de trousseau*; and while Lucy Markle and Mrs. Merrill's own maid arranged the gowns and lingerie in Virginia's bedroom, Mme. Dupré was pleased to look on. The little bride-elect listened rapturously to her comments and lively reminiscences of other trousseaux, other brides and other weddings of the Faubourg St. Germain and Park Lane, in which she had had some part. For while her husband had painted the beautiful women of three countries, Georgiana had doubled his fame by her mere existence as his wife. Before she took her departure to-day, she produced, for Virginia, her wedding gift: a square, golden box, beautifully chased, with Virginia's monogram in topazes on its lid. The young girl received it with a cry of admiration. Nor did any presentiment of the part of that box in her future drama, cause her heart to sink as she examined it.

It was half past three when Mme. Dupré left the Merrill house; whereupon Virginia was made to lie down for an hour before the arrival of her friends for tea and the examination of the gowns. Mrs. Merrill descended to the drawing-room, to find Van Studdiford arrived and talking with her husband. Amid all the gay excitement of preparation in that house, John Merrill was the one who stood aside. Hasty consent to the engagement had been extracted from him. He had provided an embarrassing check for the necessary expenses. And thereafter he had sat apart, always absorbed in his own, sorrowful, dingy

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existence of regret at the loss of that which is body and blood to the American man: his business. He scarcely noticed at all those things in which his wife and daughter were so happily engaged. To-day he was talking to Van Studdiford only because Van Studdiford had walked in upon him, and there had been no one to turn him over to. Five minutes after the entrance of his wife, he disappeared, silently, to his library. And Mrs. Merrill saw and seized upon a longed-for opportunity.

She and Charles were absolutely alone. There was little danger of interruption for at least half an hour; and there was something that she had long wanted to discuss with him. It was a matter over which she had debated within herself for many weeks, hesitating while she wanted it done, and fervently wishing that in this country the custom was the same as in England: that there should be, between her husband and Van Studdiford, a regular arrangement of marriage settlements. For money was the subject of the much-desired interview. Virginia must go to her husband penniless; but her Mother, taught by bitterest experience, as fully intended that Virginia should have some money, however little, settled upon her for her own, as she intended to have Van Studdiford's millions behind the family. Of course, some day, Virginia would have all the wealth. And yet—who could tell? There are things other than corners in lard that sweep away men's fortunes swiftly and unexpectedly.

For this reason, on that Sunday afternoon, Caroline Merrill, a Mother as unselfish as environment would let her be, knowing her husband useless for her purpose,

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chose a truly feminine method of going about a man's business. How, by what roundabout means, she reached her point, she herself could scarcely have told. The beginning was made far afield. Then she skirted round the subject, played with it, appealed to Charles with blind, reminiscent cases, finally, with tact, with delicacy, but entirely without that blunt sincerity that pleased him best, laid her wishes before him.

"Believe me, Charles, it will be easier for you:—so much easier, for both of you. Virginia need never be humiliated by the necessity for asking. Her little income would supply all her personal wants. And you would never know the annoyance of an untimely demand."

She finished rather nervously, inwardly tremulous; feeling already, with her peculiar sensibility, that her method had been ill-chosen. But she could not have been straightforward about a matter bordering so closely upon ill-breeding: and Charles could be nothing else. He sat very still in his chair by the table, his face redder than usual, his blue eyes regarding her steadily, a little coldly. He was angry. He very much resented such feminine intrusions into his private intentions. But he desired to show neither anger nor resentment. Therefore there was a difficult pause before he finally began:

"You needn't be afraid, Mrs. Merrill, that I shall ever be inconvenienced by requests for money made by Virginia. Nor need you be afraid that I shall ever refuse them—if they're reasonable. I shall also try to keep Virginia sufficiently well supplied to make ordinary demands on me unnecessary. But I've got my own ideas about

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where the money should be in a family. If Virginia had a big fortune in her own right, I'd hesitate a good deal about marrying her. I believe in the old-fashioned idea that if the wife makes the home the husband shall earn the bread for it. And as long as your daughter is my wife, she shall get her money from me. If there comes a time when I haven't much left, she'll share what I have. But, in marrying me, she should look forward to every possibility, and be ready to meet it with me. I think in this I'm conforming to the notion expressed in the marriage ceremony. If not—well, I'll continue to think and to act in my own way; for as long as I live, I shall be the master of my family. That is to be thoroughly understood, please, by Virginia also, before she marries me."

He concluded quietly enough, but in a tone that set Mrs. Merrill's teeth on edge. She was a woman who hated reasonable opposition. And—there was no question that Van Studdiford had a kind of innate coarseness in him: the coarseness inherent in the old idea of ruling a woman through absolute dependence: belief in the unlimited monarchy of marriage.

The Mother's first, swift impulse, on the conclusion of his speech, was to inform him, as quietly as he himself had spoken, that, under the circumstances, his marriage with her daughter would be unadvisable and impossible. Her second wish was to rise and make her escape from the room. Both impulses she controlled, by a strong effort, for the sake of Virginia. Whether Van Studdiford was difficult or not, neither she nor her daughter could afford to let the match go. So she dropped the subject with

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that patient repression acquired during a long and difficult training, and suavely turned to other matters. During the afternoon that followed, she appeared as charming as usual; playing her unhappy rôle so well that even her daughter never dreamed of what lay beneath the surface. But Mrs. Merrill was bitterly chagrined over her defeat; and, what was worse, she had had instilled into her a fear of the future. She had been made to see that the man who had wealth enough to make a suitable husband for her daughter, was also possessed of an individuality of his own so marked that a loveless marriage with him might turn out to have dangers and difficulties not yet surmised by anyone. This was, perhaps, not quite the way Mrs. Merrill expressed it to herself. She felt only the humiliation of having to accept defeat at her son-in-law's hands without complaint: of having to deliver Virginia up to him unprotected, without any loophole of possible escape, in case, after a time, that of which she was as yet so blessedly ignorant, should come upon her.

The days passed swiftly. Already spring was rushing into the arms of summer. The Merrills had issued their wedding invitations. The wedding gown—that exquisite little gown in which Virginia looked like some ethereal spirit, had come home, and lay, with its tulle veil, in a big, perfumed box in Virginia's room. Gifts were arriving daily, in increasing numbers; and a large room on the second floor had been filled with white-covered tables to receive them. The bridesmaids had now all returned; and their young voices filled the Merrill house at

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every hour of the day and evening. Finally, one week before the wedding, Marion Hunt arrived from Grangeford, to stay with Virginia till the great affair was over.

No completer contrast between women can be imagined than that between these two friends. Marion was twenty-one years old, not at all pretty, but good-looking in a wholesome way, of a temperament wholly unemotional, containing in her nature an overlarge amount of a quality valuable but not feminine: common sense. Scarcely yet had Marion recovered from her amazement at Virginia's engagement; but she was genuinely pleased with the whole prospect, grateful at being asked to assist at the ceremony, delighted with her gown, with Virginia's trousseau, with the gifts, with everything, indeed, that any woman could be supposed to like. Mrs. Merrill took a fancy to her, and was comforted by the thought that Virginia would have her close at hand during the first part of her new life in a country town.

The days were busy enough. But on the nights of this last week Mrs. Merrill had decreed that there should be no entertainments save the wedding rehearsal, with a supper following, two nights before the ceremony. So, in the evenings, after they had gone upstairs, Virginia and Marion, meeting in one bedroom or the other, indulged in long, girlish talks. And Marion, always old for her age, understanding, somewhat, a woman's responsibilities, found herself constantly amazed at the perfect innocence, or childishness, or thoughtlessness of Virginia's notions of her future life. In London, it was to be a very amusing thing to wear a décolleté gown while

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dining in public restaurants. They must surely stop at the new hotel: the Savoy. And in Paris she wanted to get two more negligées. And perhaps—ah, Marion, perhaps they would go to a *café chantant*; for should she not be a married woman then? It would be such fun to be a matron, eligible for chaperoning her old school-friends! And, as soon as she was settled in Grangeford, she must have two “at homes.”—Oh, never mind if there weren’t enough people for two. Every girl in Chicago who had married well, always had two days after she came back from her journey.—And Marion must lunch with her very often; because probably Charles would seldom be able to come home in the middle of the day. And Marion promised, gravely, to come; and wondered, and pitied, and wanted sometimes to laugh; but asked no leading questions, nor ever made a single suggestion that could disturb the child’s perfect tranquillity and ridiculous little vanities about the misty future.

Sunday came, with Church, Charles, and much writing of notes of thanks in the afternoon. On Monday, a thousand things were to be done: thirty or more presents to be unpacked, exclaimed over and arranged; then more notes of acknowledgment: Virginia wishing to take away as few gift-cards as possible. At four in the afternoon all the bridesmaids arrived for tea; and there ensued a lively discussion as to the arrangement of the bridal procession at the Church. On that point, there were as many ideas as girls. But Virginia’s own plan had been conceived long before, and she was not to be turned from it now. There was to be a full choir, singing the Lohen-

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grin music, to precede the ushers, followed by the rest of the party in regulation order; "The Voice that Breathed o'er Eden" during the ceremony; and Mendelssohn afterwards:—a perfectly conventional arrangement, which, considering Virginia's real taste in music, was a little remarkable.

It was nearly six o'clock before the tea-party broke up; and then there was a scramble to be dressed for dinner, which was hastily eaten that half past eight might find them at the Church. Mrs. Merrill drove over in a brougham with Van Studdiford; leaving her husband to follow, in a large carriage, with the two girls. Thus Virginia, chattering eagerly with Marion, felt no pang of nervousness till they were actually inside Grace Church, surrounded by a little throng of ushers and intimate friends. Virginia greeted everyone much as usual, but without any consciousness of what she said. She was in a sudden haze. It had come over her, at last, that she was going to be married: she, Virginia Merrill. She was to be married, to that stout, florid man, who stood talking to the rector!—And Virginia was in a breathless panic.

They were at the Church for an hour and a half. There were repeated trials of the procession, the recession, the arrangement at the altar. More than once Virginia and Van Studdiford found themselves standing together before the Reverend Mr. Bentham. Each time Virginia trembled, violently. Each time there rose a new pang of dread in her heart. Nor did the subtle discomfort vanish when she found herself at home again, seated

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beside her fiancé at one end of the long supper-table. Here, however, were a few moments of excitement. Before each of the bridesmaids lay a small, white parcel:—the gifts from the bride and groom. At Virginia's place was a square, flat box: Charles' gift to her. And now, at last, there came a little thrill of pleasure to the heart of the bride. She had spent a good deal of time wondering what Charles would give her. But, when she opened the purple velvet case, the thrill within her died.—Only pearls! Only two rows of magnificent white pearls: the fairest, the most lustrous, that Tiffany could provide! All her life she had had pearls. She had dreamed of diamonds—the matron's stone; or even rubies. But these, whatever their price, were a bitter disappointment to her. Nevertheless, she must thank him. And she did, very prettily. Of all those around her, only one read her face accurately; and he smiled to himself, no less at her childishness than at Van Studdiford's ignorance of women's minds. Philip Atkinson would not have made the mistake of giving pearls to a woman under thirty. But he did not speak to Virginia at all, nor did she give him more than the necessary greeting that night.

It was one o'clock before the house was quiet; and Virginia was tired enough to go to sleep at once, and to sleep soundly. But next morning, when she woke, there was a weight on her heart that she carried with her for many hours. It was a quiet day, spent entirely with her Mother and Marion. Charles was to stay all night in Grangeford; so, in the evening, the ladies went upstairs at nine o'clock. To-night there was no talk-

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ing in the girls' rooms. Marion wisely ignored the suggestion; for she thought that Virginia's best preparation for the strain of to-morrow would be a long, quiet sleep. And how should she know that the poor little bride-elect, for the first time in her life, could not sleep? The lights were out. Virginia crept into bed, laid her head on the cool pillow, opened her eyes wide to the darkness, and was confronted with—facts. There rose before her the weeks that had elapsed since her engagement was announced: the ten, butterfly weeks, for the joy of which she had really given her promise to marry. Now they had flitted away into the blackness of past time. To-night was the last night in which she should lie peacefully in her white bed under her Father's roof, with her Mother always within call. In fifteen hours more, only fifteen short hours, she—What was that!

Virginia sat up in bed. The handle of her door turned, softly. She caught the little rustle of soft silk on the carpet. Then some one bent over her bed, some one was murmuring, tenderly: "Virginia—darling! My little girl! My baby!" And Virginia's arms were clasped about her Mother's neck.

In the darkness, whispered words of comfort were poured into the child's frightened mind. There were caresses, such as Mothers give tiny children waked by some terrifying dream. There was that tender soothing that still had power to dispel what trouble lay in the daughter's heart. And thus, finally, half an hour later, Virginia was peacefully asleep, her head upon her Mother's shoulder. But the eyes of Mrs. Merrill were

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not to be so easily closed. How many hours they stared into the cruel night, may not be told.

By a quarter before twelve, on Wednesday, the fourth of June, Grace Church was crowded with men and women. Outside, the day was perfect; and Society, on the point of departure to summer climes, wore its newest, lightest, most frivolous costumes. The Church, massed with green and white, formed a background well-suited to the fluttering audience who so seldom condescended to wait, anywhere, for anything, as they were waiting now. It was twelve o'clock. Would she be late? No. The organ stopped the voluntary. The chimes were ringing out.—There. They were over. From the vestry came the first, faint strains of the Lohengrin bridal music, which, the organ answering, now pealed through the church.

“There’s the groom.”—“What a pretty procession!”—“How well they have matched the ushers!”—“Look at those trains—only Doucet could have hung them better!”—“Ah!—She really *is* beautiful!”

This last formed an echoing murmur down the church, as Virginia progressed, on her Father’s arm. Beautiful she was, indeed. The sun, streaming through a high, open window, sent a long shaft down the aisle through which she walked; and her bronze hair gleamed like an aureole under the film of her veil. Her gown, of the most delicate lace and chiffon, fitted her as if it were some part of herself. Around her neck, her only ornament, were the pearls—well matching her skin. She carried the heavy court train superbly. Her face was

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uplifted, and bore no trace of tears. What poise the child had!

And in truth Virginia had not wept to-day. The terror of the night before was quite gone. She felt nothing now. Never in her life had she been more passive. At the foot of the chancel steps Van Studdiford advanced a little toward her, and she left her Father's arm. The whole Church leaned forward to watch the ceremony; —and they missed nothing. Both responses were given clearly; and people found everything, from passionate love to hatred, in Virginia's tones. As a matter of fact, they represented no feeling at all; for she was speaking like an automaton.

Few legal things are so short as the service that binds a man and a woman together for a lifetime. In seven minutes Mr. and Mrs. Van Studdiford were coming down the aisle, to the music of the most triumphant, the most joyous of wedding marches. Virginia kissed her Mother, and then left the church with her husband, who, through the drive home, gazed anxiously at her white face, and found scarcely a word to say. At the house, two or three hours more of respite awaited her. Amid the tumult of enthusiastic maids, interested ushers, and the hundred gushing friends asked to the breakfast, there was no time for thought. But during this period a new change came upon Virginia. After all, why should she be so unhappy? What was there that was so dreadful about marriage? At least, with all her husband's wealth, contentment might be found. And it was with this unworthiest thought in her mind that she went upstairs, with her

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Mother and Marion Hunt, to change the wedding dress for her brown travelling suit, the color of which had been specially requested by Charles. At half past four tea was served in the drawing-room to the bride and groom and the half-dozen people still remaining; and at ten minutes to five a smart little brougham drove up to the door.

John Merrill stood at a window, his back to the room, staring out into the street with blurred eyes. Virginia's throat ached, and she made no attempt to speak. But Mrs. Merrill took her little girl into her arms, the others, even Van Studdiford, drawing away into the hall. James Atkinson appeared there with an old shoe sticking out of his pocket; and a mysterious bag in his hand, into which everybody dipped. The suit-cases had already gone to the carriage. One moment:—there was a rush to the door. Van Studdiford caught his bride round the waist, and, through a furious shower of rice, the two gained the brougham. The door shut, smartly. The horses sprang forward. Virginia had one last look back at the house that was no longer her home, and in it saw her Father's face still pressed against the pane. Through all the laughing bustle of the departure, he had not moved.

Promptly at half past five, the Lake Shore Limited, of its day the finest train in the world, pulled out of the Chicago station, Eastward bound. Virginia was seated in one of the staterooms, staring out, as the train swung along, upon the squalid quarters of the dirty city, in their frayed summer dress, where a ragged willow or two gave a wan suggestion of country glories. The motion always soothed her for the first few minutes; and to-day,

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particularly, she wanted the quiet that it gave. She sat, therefore, perfectly still, her hands folded in her lap, her head leaning back, her eyes half-closed. When Van Studdiford came in his manner was stilled by the sight of her. Opening his suit-case, he took out a clothes-brush.

"There is a little rice in your dress, and some in your hat I think, my dear," he observed. "I'll brush it out for you."

Virginia was, just then, very reluctant to move. But she rose, obediently, and he brushed at her till a few grains fell from the folds of her skirt and the waist under her jacket. Then, as he, with a little effort in the stooping, set about gathering them up, she took off her hat, reseated herself, and went through the trimming, finding, here and there, a white speck.

The train moved faster. Van Studdiford seated himself opposite her and was soon absorbed in the huge, folding time-table, which provides soul-satisfying reading-matter for the American traveller throughout every journey taken in his country. Before he looked up from his delighted perusal of the familiar stops, Virginia, worn out with the day, had fallen asleep, her white face looking more peaceful and untroubled than it had for the past week.

"Sec'nd call fo' dinner in the dining-ca'!"

She woke, with a start. Day had not yet died, but the lights were up all round her, and Charles stood at hand, washed and neatly brushed.

"Come, Virginia! Let us go in. You must want something by this time." Van Studdiford himself was very hungry.

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Virginia put on her hat and followed him through the train to the dining-car, where they were promptly seated at a table for two.

"Cocktail, my dear?" he asked, as the waiter bent over them.

She refused, not because she did not really wish to taste one, but because of the tone in which he offered it.

"One dry Martini, then, and tomato soup for two.—And salted almonds, you know, and the rest of it!"

"Y-es sah!" responded the waiter, darting away.

Virginia leaned back against the end-board behind her. Her unpremeditated nap had made her head ache a little; and the closeness of the car was unpleasant. Van Studdiford regarded her uneasily. She looked more delicate than he had heretofore thought her; and she did not seem very talkative. Was it possible that she could sulk?

Fortunately the steward now arrived, placing a cocktail before him. He drank it, politely, to his bride, who returned a slight smile. Immediately afterward the soup came; and Virginia felt some interest in it now. But before her plate was half empty she ceased to eat for a moment, while she raised her eyes and looked at her husband. His head was bent over, till only its bald top and a part of his pink face, grotesquely fore-shortened, were visible. He was eating his soup vigorously, supping it with keen enjoyment.

Virginia looked, turned her eyes away, and then fastened them on him again, while a slow flush spread over her pale face. Heavens! How disgusting he was!—And she was *married* to him!

## CHAPTER III

THE little city of Grangeford was one of the many Illinois towns that have been robbed of their birthright by the phenomenal growth of the great metropolis near-by. Grangeford was older than Chicago, was admirably situated on a river, and had been a successful manufacturing place in its rival's infancy. But where it stood in the fifties, it stands now: a city indeed, but wholly dependent for its comforts and its luxuries on its overwhelming neighbor.

Grangeford had twelve thousand inhabitants; and of these, perhaps fifty were people worth knowing well. Humble as they were in their own estimation, after daily perusal of the society columns of Chicago papers, there was, nevertheless, something in their quiet social life, a solidity, an unchangeableness, an absence of rivalry or strain, that gave to their gatherings a tone not to be found in the blatant gaucherie of the so-called smart set of the great city. The daily habits of life of these people were arranged rather for comfort than for fashion. Nearly everyone, the Hunts included, dined in the middle of the day; few breakfasted later than half past seven; and the pretty supper was usually served at six. At the same time, none of these families, finding themselves in the Annex, the Waldorf, or the Carleton, as the case might be,

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would have been in the least at a loss to order a proper, even an artistic, luncheon or dinner for any number. And though people in cities have nothing to tempt them toward a brief and early evening meal, the inhabitants of country towns have good cause not to imprison themselves in the house, at table, during the sunset hour and the twilight that follows.

At many Grangeford tables, on the evening of the ninth of October, the same subject was under discussion : a subject more than usually interesting, in that it concerned people well known in the great world, and, at the same time, closely touching themselves. For, on the morrow, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Van Studdiford, the hitherto King of Grangeford and his bride, were coming home. Tomorrow they would arrive from their protracted honeymoon ; and the town might see what four months of married life had done for their bluff millionaire ; and also for little Miss Merrill's shy graciousness and delicate beauty. Most of the members of Grangeford society had been at the wedding ; and since that day Virginia had been a frequent object of admiration and discussion among them. Her homecoming, also, had been eagerly looked forward to ; for soon thereafter there was sure to be some sort of entertainment in the great house on the hill. But, just now, the primal and important question with each family was, how soon, and at what period of the day or evening, it would be best to call.

Marion Hunt, of course, would go at once, and informally : in the morning, doubtless. Old Major and Mrs. Pattison, never seen apart, even at market, decided on an

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afternoon a week after the return. Dr. and Mrs. Haswell, the Doctor not Mr. Van Studdiford's physician, would wait ten days—if they could. Dr. Hollis told his wife to run in on the third or fourth day. Lawrence Burnwell, now first bachelor in Grangeford (Philip Atkinson being scarcely counted as a resident) thought of presenting himself for a few moments on Sunday evening; he having a new white vest that looked extremely well with his frock coat. The Reverend Heminway and his three daughters, Clarissa, Molly and Jane, talked the matter over earnestly for five nights;—and the end was a general family dissension. Lastly, Madam Farnsworth, dictatress, in her quiet way, of all the town, and a woman eminently fitted for that post, decided to wait till young Mrs. Van Studdiford had indicated her own wishes in the matter of general acquaintanceship. For she guessed that Virginia considered herself of a class apart from the people among whom she was coming; and she knew also that there is no one so difficult to deal with as an inexperienced young woman.

Madam Farnsworth's quiet surmises were right. From the very beginning Virginia, sometimes consciously, oftener not, was destined to disturb the plans of her fellow-townspeople. First of all, she did not arrive on the tenth, with her husband; but on the afternoon of the twelfth: having stayed over in Chicago, with her Mother, for an extra two days. Only Mrs. Hunt and Marion, beside Miss Van Studdiford, were at the station to meet her. Charles was at the factory, involved in a labyrinth of work left undone by Atkinson. And the intimate friends of the

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family, having greeted the solitary Charles two days before, on the 11.40 train, decided not to assail his wife alone, and restrained their curiosity till a more formal opportunity.

Nevertheless, Virginia's arrival was a ceremony. There were those who saw her—and they never seemed to forget it, as she alighted from the train and stood for a few moments on the platform: slender, misty-eyed, clinging a little to Marion Hunt; with her maid, Lucy Markle, behind her, Miss Van Studdiford awkwardly waiting in front, and, at a little distance to the right, her eight trunks, in a tumbling pile, as they had been thrown off the train. Marion gazed into the face of her friend with earnest inquiry, finding there less actual change than a transitional indefiniteness. The schooling of the past months had been severe; but it had not yet driven the childish youth from her.

Presently, tired of her position, gaunt Miss Van Studdiford advanced toward "Charles' wife," and kissed her, solemnly. Lucy carried two bags to the surrey which was evidently awaiting her mistress, and climbed into the seat beside the coachman, smiling pleasantly as she did so, and saying, in her English voice:

"I've Madam's trunk checks. Shall I leave them with you?"

"Yes, Miss," returned Sefton, with a broad, Cockney accent. And Lucy smiled again. After all, she might come to feel at home in Grangeford.

Virginia left the Hunts only on condition that Marion should come to her early in the morning, to watch the un-

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packing of her Paris trunks. Then, at last, she followed Mary Van Studdiford to the surrey, and seated herself behind Lucy. Sefton jerked his reins, spoke to the animals, and, in a moment, they were off, up the wide, maple-shaded street, to James Road, far along which, to the South of the town, near that spot where the well-kept street became a country highway, stood the Van Studdiford house. Virginia knew the city and the location of her new home very well; but she glanced at everything with new eyes: the pretty streets and houses of the North side, the smoky barrenness of the manufacturing and business portion along the river, where the great plow factory centred everything; and again at the residence streets of the South side, where the big yards around the homes were adrift with heaps of fallen maple-leaves, red and gold and richest bronze. They had not to pass through the thickly populated Eastern quarter, where the factory workers lived; and for many years after her marriage Virginia knew nothing of that part of Grangeford.

Most of the drive was silent; though Miss Van Studdiford tried her best to be agreeable, and Virginia responded politely to her trite remarks. Only one question did the bride venture of her own accord, though even this matter was indifferent to her. She asked if Philip Atkinson were still living in the Van Studdiford house.

“He left a week ago on his vacation,” was the reply. “And Charles says he has got to go to Cuba again as soon as he gets back.”

Virginia felt a little surprise that she should have so keen a sense of disappointment in not seeing Philip

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on her arrival. But presently they were driving into the yard of her new home, and everything else was forgotten.

The Van Studdiford place, the largest in Grangeford, a huge red and gray house set in the middle of ten acres of beautifully kept grounds, with James street on the East, a patch of woods on the South, and the river for a Western boundary, had been fittingly prepared, without and within, for the reception of its new Mistress. When Carson, the butler, opened the door before the bell could be rung, Virginia found all the servants ranged formally at the end of the big hall to be greeted by her. Carson, with large dignity, indicated them one by one; and Virginia, much astonished and not a little bewildered at this proceeding, spoke to each with the apparent repose of a matron of fifty; and then, in a panic, demanded to be taken to her own room. Immediately Carson, motioning the assemblage away with a quick gesture, ceremoniously conducted her upstairs, making her wish at each step that she had been content to remain below. However, they halted at last, before a closed door, and Carson observed:

"Our usual dinner hour, Madam, has been seven o'clock. And where shall I serve tea?"

It was already half past five; but the suggestion of tea was the first comfortable thing she had found in her new surroundings; and her heart and her manner came back together as she answered: "Bring tea to my room at once. I will be down at seven." And without remembering her sister-in-law, who had disappeared upon their arrival, she opened the door, ran into her room, and flung herself into a morris chair by the bay-window. While she

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sat there, gazing about her, making no effort to move, Lucy Markle entered by another door, removed her hat and gloves, and, while she turned to get slippers from the travelling-bag, Virginia found energy enough to take off her coat. It was an unspeakable luxury to have her maid again; for Charles had been a poor substitute on the wedding trip; and Lucy had spent the whole summer in Mrs. Merrill's household and Van Studdiford's pay, because Virginia liked her and would not let her go.

In a space of time short enough to prove Carson's efficacy, tea arrived, well arranged, and Virginia, reviving under its mild stimulation, sat up straighter and examined her bedroom. Certainly it was as pretty as she herself could desire: done in shades of yellow, from butter-color to cream; and the little stiffness in the placing of the furniture, that bespoke Miss Van Studdiford's hand, would disappear forever when Virginia had lived there a single night. The one disadvantage in the room lay in its three doorways, two of which were covered only by silk curtains. The first of these opening into a large bathroom, which was connected with a great, cedar-lined wardrobe; and the second into a boudoir, the daintiest little place imaginable, from the far end of which one could enter the small room to be used by Lucy Markle. To the maid, this arrangement seemed everything that could be wished; but she wondered a little, nevertheless, where her Master was to sleep. And, as a matter of fact, Charles' room was on the other side of the house, just over the dining-room, some distance away.

When her tea was finished Virginia walked about,

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mentally arranging her belongings, and investigating her new domain with some interest. But after fifteen minutes she returned to her chair again, and sat there, listlessly gazing out of the window, a look on her face that Lucy tried in vain to account for: a look of weariness, of indifference, that amounted almost to pain. And, indeed, Virginia's heart was full of dread: dread of the mere prospect of dinner, with strange servants, in a strange place: dread of her stiff sister-in-law; worst of all, dread of seeing Van Studdiford, of having to sit across the table from him, of having, for the five hundredth time, to watch—and hear him—eat.

At six o'clock the trunks arrived and were ranged in a row outside the bedroom door. Then Virginia was prevailed upon to bathe, and have her hair done, and to dress for dinner in a gown of dull, bluish crêpe, that Charles especially fancied.

It was ten minutes to seven when Mrs. Van Studdiford walked into the long drawing-room, to find her sister-in-law seated there, but no sign of Charles. Virginia wandered, instinctively, to the piano, and began to play, softly, idly, but with a delicacy of touch and expression that at once marked her a musician born. Five minutes later there was a sound of rapid hoofs on the gravel outside, and presently Van Studdiford, unshaven and soiled with work, came hurriedly into the room, kissed his sister, and then went to his wife. As he looked at her there was a gleam of admiration in his eyes, and a genuine tenderness in his manner as he took her about the waist and kissed her. And although the only light in her

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face was one of weariness, still she returned his kiss gently, and he was satisfied. For Virginia, selfish, capricious, unloving and unhappy as, at this time, she was, had nevertheless completely conquered a hard man. Van Studdiford adored her; and, in his eyes, she was faultless.

Many days went by, and, by degrees, the Grangeford people became exasperated at the difficulty of knowing, or even seeing, young Mrs. Van Studdiford. Two or three of the more daring had called, and been received, it is true; but the accounts they brought away of the manner of the young matron were not such as induced others to try their experiment. At the same time there flew about such alarming reports of the state and ceremony kept in the Van Studdiford household, that even Lawrence Burnwell decided to refrain from "dashing in" on Sunday evening: afraid, at the last moment, that a white vest and frock coat might not be suitable in that alarming place. Indeed, it was even possible that on Sundays, as on week-days, these remarkable people dined at night; in which case Van Studdiford might appear in a dinner coat. The Misses Heminway fairly trembled at this thought;—and yearned to know if it were true.

At last, when feminine Grangeford was in a state of lifted eyebrows whenever Virginia was mentioned, there came a bolt from the blue in the shape of elaborately engraved invitations informing all Grangeford society that Mr. and Mrs. Van Studdiford would be at home on the evening of Thursday, October the twenty-ninth, at half after eight o'clock. Here was a theme!—if Grangeford wished. But apparently Grangeford did not wish. Cer-

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tainly it was most pleasant that Charles Van Studdiford should ask his friends to meet his bride. But it was not strange. No. Grangeford pulled itself together and looked Virginia in the eye. Did she imagine they did not know how to conduct themselves about an evening reception? There was a butler at her table, was there? *She* dined at night? Well, when there was a family of little ones to be cared for, she would see how unhealthy the custom was. At any rate, she should not put them down as country folk without any knowledge of the mysterious workings of etiquette. And, with many an untranslatable shrug, the ladies unpacked and aired their evening gowns, and began otherwise to prepare for what was eventually and inevitably to be called: "the function."

Virginia, lonely, even forlorn as she felt in the great house, never suspected the attitude which Grangeford had gradually been taking toward her. It is scarcely probable, however, that, had she known about it, she would have made the least effort to change it. Poor child! How should she realize that on her relations with the people of that country town must depend the largest part of the happiness of all her future years? Fortunately, one person who was near to her heart did understand this. Mrs. Merrill, tied to Chicago as she still was by a lack of money and a husband whose mind was failing rapidly, nevertheless found time to ply Virginia with constant advice regarding her social starting-point: the first entertainment in her new home. It was Mrs. Merrill who had suggested it; Mrs. Merrill who planned all its details, from the making it an evening affair to the color of the

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candles. And, on the twenty-seventh of the month, the Mother left her invalid in charge of his nurse, and went to Grangeford to stay through the week, taking with her her maid, and the most elaborate evening gown she possessed.

Owing wholly to Mrs. Merrill's efforts, knowledge and tact, that reception was a success talked of for years to come; and it went far toward removing the prejudice against Mrs. Merrill's daughter. However, if the Van Studdiford house was radiant with light, walled with flowers, filled with waiters and flowing with golden wine, Grangeford society also outdid itself. The eighty or more people that had been invited all came, and were, every one of them, perfectly easy, perfectly polite, and infinitely better dressed than Mrs. Merrill had thought possible. Virginia herself was amazed; and within an hour her guests rose, in her estimation, to a point whence they could command her respect. As a matter of fact, there are few large evening affairs in Chicago where some women, at least, do not defy every law of taste and propriety and appear in high-necked gowns, with hats! Not so here. Virginia herself, in pale yellow tulle, with her pearls about her neck, and a great bouquet of *Perle de Jardin* roses in her arm, was the most simply gowned but inevitably the most beautiful woman there.

Grangeford itself graciously admitted this. For more than half an hour old Major Pattison stood in the North corner of the drawing-room, a napkin hanging from his low-cut vest, a plate with a glass of champagne cup on it held chin high, while he poured forth compliments about

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his hostess, his host, his hostess' Mother, the house, the party, the guests, and the "punch"; while his little, withered, charming old wife hovered close about him, fearful lest some of their friends might miss his eloquence. Lawrence Burnwell performed astonishing feats in the dining-room; yet never appeared to be more than ten feet from Virginia's side. When the dancing began he had the temerity to ask her for the first waltz, and panted with pride at the memory of that achievement for days after. The Reverend Heminway, heart of a bouquet of bright-eyed daughters, wandered slowly through every room in the house, beaming over his glasses at the chorus of "Ahs!" and "Ohs!" of the Misses Clarissa, Molly and Jane. Doctors Haswell and Hollis, whose rivalry now and again extended a little beyond the line of friendliness, were seen to pledge each other more than once, in the heartiest way. Mr. Aronson, the lawyer, a childless widower, danced twice with Marion Hunt, and, later, took her to the dining-room. And Marion was glad to accept his attentions, if only for the sake of taking her thoughts from herself. For to Marion only, out of all that company, was the evening not wholly a happiness. Someone was missing from the rooms: someone whose presence had long ago begun to constitute happiness to her. Philip Atkinson was not in Grangeford; and, suddenly, Grangeford was empty.

It was half past twelve before the last guest of this extended reception had gone. Mrs. Merrill, well pleased with the evening's success, was glad enough to get into bed and forget even her anxiety about her husband in

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sleep. By a quarter past one Van Studdiford, in his room, and his sister in hers, were alike unconscious of the waking world. Only Virginia could not sleep. Only Virginia, aching, burning, freezing, sick, faint, palpitating, in quick succession, could not shut her eyes. What was the matter with her? Was she going to be very ill? Was she going to die?—alone? without any help? She was far too miserable to care. Lights danced before her eyes. The hum of voices filled her ears. Slowly, by imperceptible degrees, she fell into a feverish, dreamful sleep.

Breakfast was very late at the Van Studdiford house next morning. Van Studdiford had been at work in the factory for two hours before Mrs. Merrill and Miss Mary met in the dining-room. Only then did the Mother inquire after Virginia, to be told that Mrs. Van Studdiford was suffering greatly, and could not get up. Leaving her meal untouched, Mrs. Merrill hurried to her daughter's room, with the result that, ten minutes later, a groom was speeding down the hill, along the James Road, after Doctor Hollis.

Four days later Mrs. Merrill, daring to stay away from her invalid no longer, left Grangeford. Virginia was about again, drearily. Care and skill had prevented the consequences of her pathetically ignorant imprudence. But even the Mother did not dream of the state of mind in which she left her child: the blank terror, the dread of ensuing days which she must face alone, too shy to confess herself to anyone, even her oldest friend. For Virginia's young eyes had just been opened to what

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hitherto had been the mystery of life; and, in the strangeness of it, horror came forth and claimed her.

November, the melancholy month, had come. Prairie winds shook the last, hectic leaf from the maples. The well-cared-for yards were being put into their winter state: bushes wrapped in straw, lawns covered from the approaching cold. The long, Grangeford streets, robbed of their borders of softening, shadowy foliage, looked desolate enough. The smoke from the factories on the river seemed to cover the dull sky with a darker curtain. The afternoons were short, the mornings late, and supper was eaten by lamplight. Grangeford folk, not averse to winter, busied themselves in pleasant ways: went to Chicago to shop and do the theaters; gave informal sewing parties; studied the lengthening society columns in the *Tribune* and the *Times-Herald*, and even began to plan for a function or two of their own. They were as happy, in their mild way, as in the Spring, perhaps. But to the newcomer among them everything was very different. Poor Virginia! What woman will not pity her? Young, fatally ignorant, perfectly inexperienced, never having been permitted even to read of life, fitted only for a butterfly existence, she found herself in the most difficult of all situations, with no one at hand who could guide or cheer her. She was by no means well. She was desperately lonely. Her mind was in a highly morbid condition; and she was impelled persistently to avoid the one person who might, through love and tenderness, have made everything bearable:—her husband. But poor Van Studdiford she tormented till he was nearly

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as wretched as herself; and finally her behavior was followed by unexpected consequences. Miss Van Studdiford watched the tempers and petulances toward her adored brother first with amazement, and then with an indignation that would not be suppressed. How should an unmarried woman of forty know what her sister-in-law of eighteen was undergoing? Driven, finally, beyond her self-control, the poor woman one day remonstrated strongly with Virginia on her state of temper. The result was a quarrel that sent Virginia to bed for three days, and made Charles so furious, not with his blamable wife, but with his devoted (but red-haired) sister, that poor Mary, her heart turned to lead within her, packed her modest wardrobe and set off to Denver, to the refuge offered by a hospitable cousin.

Probably Virginia never regretted the consequences of that unpleasantness. It was too much of a relief to be freed from Miss Van Studdiford's gaunt and silent presence for her to see her great selfishness in its true light. But, though poor Miss Mary could not be called good company, she had still been more than nothing: a little better than nobody at all. In her least vacant moods at table, over afternoon tea at dusk, she had been at least a figure to talk *at*;—and now even she was lost.

Never before had Virginia Merrill dreamed of that which now befell her: the dreary misery that lonely ill-health can bring. She had never thought of such an unhappiness except in connection with the very old or the lower-class poor. But now she knew it for her own. Her Mother was away from her almost all the time, trying

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the effects of various American springs on John Merrill's failing body and fallen brain:—a quest serving to preserve the shred of false hope in both of them. The town house had at last been rented. Virginia's former companions were all in the midst of their first "season"; and which of them would have cared to leave her gayety to pay a visit to a prisoner in a dull country town, without friends, and without energy to make them? Alas! Virginia knew very well what answer she should herself have given in like case. Moreover, had anyone actually offered to come to her, Virginia would probably have excused herself from hostess-ship; for she bitterly resented, was bitterly ashamed of, her appearance. It was this that caused her to frustrate every kindly attempt toward companionship on the part of the Grangeford women, many of whom tried hard to do her little kindnesses, or offered to come and sit with her in the afternoon. But these natural, all-comprehending Mothers, never dreaming of Mrs. Van Studdiford's state of mind, resented the repulses to their good-nature, never understanding that they came entirely through shyness, not the haughty pride always ascribed to her. For Virginia had had none of that true experience with the broad, genial world that gives smile for smile, and finds a rule for every situation. And it seemed wholly impossible that she should let any of these aggressive strangers into her pitiable existence.

Three only refuges, through that dreary winter, the undeveloped wife and mother had: Marion Hunt, Doctor Hollis, and her music. Marion, indeed, came to be her good angel, fighting her battles without, giving her real

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affection and sympathy within. For Marion cared genuinely for her former schoolmate, and sacrificed many a pleasure of her own, that winter, in order to spend long afternoons in the desolate house on the hill. Mrs. Hunt also performed many tasks that an absent Mother longed to be about: tried to comfort the child a little out of her own experience, and told fascinating truths of the deep joy to come.

Doctor Hollis, a bluff, hearty little man, with a spot in his heart as tender as any girl's, came often to see his young patient, who clung to him with pathetic faith, as one who knew all that she did not; and made his cheering words her gospel. As a matter of fact, a good doctor was needed more than once that winter in the millionaire's house; for Mrs. Van Studdiford proved herself very delicate; and nerves, mind and body were taxed to their uttermost. But Doctor Hollis was confident of carrying her through; and their joint faith was to win the battle.

Lastly, Music, her solitary recreation, carried her through many of the empty hours; but it was not, perhaps, the best thing that could have been devised for her mind. She fed herself upon Chopin, the Prince of Melancholy; and she could play well enough to extract all the morbid beauty of the études, the nocturnes, the ballades and the scherzos. During the morning hours she was so constantly at the piano that her progress in technique, in breadth and ease of interpretation, was astonishing. But she did not notice this, for she was playing to her own mind, by melancholy striving to free it from melancholy.

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If, during the winter months, three helps were given Virginia, she had also, beside negative discomforts, one great trial. This was her husband; for whom she felt that unreasoning and unnatural dislike that sometimes overcomes young wives in the early period of married life. Poor Charles was quite unconscious of any fault. How should he be aware that merely his bald head, his florid face, his habit of jingling keys and change in his pockets, his enjoyment of his dinner, his taste for checked vests, were all so many sharp little files that grated daily on his wife's nerves? He did his best to be forbearing with Virginia. Nay, he tried to be very tender. But more than once he found himself going to Hollis to make sure that her mind was in an unnatural condition, so wretched was he made by her unpleasant caprices. Long he persisted in his cheerfulness, and held his temper through scenes that few men could have endured stoically. But, in the end, his patience broke. He found her, one night, eating starch from a paper package that she must have obtained secretly;—for she had been strictly forbidden to indulge this craving. Angry, and a little disgusted with her, he picked up the bag and threw it out the window. Then, when she began to cry, with the long, whining wail that is the accompaniment of weakness, he turned upon her and swore her into frightened silence.

This was the beginning of the worst. Spring was coming, rapidly; but Virginia and her husband found no joy in it this year. Looking back a twelvemonth both wondered, drearily, how such changes could be. They quarreled incessantly: he being the more unreasonable,

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because he felt himself a cad for being driven so far. Nor was Virginia's natural stubbornness lessened by her lack of strength; and she sometimes persisted in her line of irritation till even Lucy, frightened by Van Studdiford's face, would plead with her Mistress to be quiet. When the house became impossible, Charles took refuge in his horses, and was often to be seen driving over the country like a madman behind his beautiful, clean-footed animals, that endured his tempers silently. Miserable Virginia! Daily she loosened a little of his affection for her; and daily, because of it, forbearance, on his part, grew more difficult. And all the while her heart was bleeding; not because of any love of hers for him, but because she had come to value his for her. Finally, one April day, an impossible situation came to a violent climax. Goaded to desperation by certain morbidly hideous assertions that she made concerning the future, Charles struck his wife: knocked her down, in fact, upon the floor of her own bedroom.

For a little, madness followed. Then came peace. Mrs. Merrill, summoned wildly by Charles himself, arrived and took command of the situation. Virginia was in bed, frightened, not too ill, and brought to her senses by the catastrophe. Charles, more thoroughly ashamed of himself than he had ever been in his life, but showing that shame only by silence and sulkiness, paid the greatest deference to his Mother-in-law, but made no effort to see his wife. Two very difficult weeks went by. Then, by degrees, through Mrs. Merrill's infinite tact, things slowly righted themselves, and the reconciliation came

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about. Neither the Mother nor Charles for an instant suspected the consequences of that blow upon Virginia's nature. How should they? She never showed what really lay beneath. But out of that one, mad moment, grew something that could never be uprooted: not hatred, perhaps, but a deepening bitterness, that was, in time, to make possible dire things. For that blow struck from her heart certain words of the marriage service. After it, Virginia ceased to honor her husband. An indelible imprint had been made upon her mind. Childish things dropped away. Suddenly she was a woman; and suddenly she had begun to understand the true consequence of a loveless marriage.

As the spring ripened and grew into May, and the world was rebeautified, Mrs. Merrill still lingered at Grangeford. She did not leave it, indeed, until some days after a telegram had been sent from the Van Studdiford house to poor John Merrill, in Pass Christian, where his nurse read it to him:

“ Miss Caroline Van Studdiford sends love to her Grandfather. Virginia very comfortable.”

## CHAPTER IV

IN the summer season, the tennis court of the Van Studdiford place had, for many years, been a rendezvous for the young people of Grangeford. This year, however, owing to the illness of the new Mistress of the house, a substitute had been found in the grounds of Madam Farnsworth, and those who had not taken to the newly omnipotent golf, went there. Nevertheless the Van Studdiford court had been marked, as usual, in May, and the grass rolled and cared for through the summer, till by now, on the tenth of August, it was in perfect condition.

The day was not extravagantly hot. A slight breeze from the east blew sufficient coolness through the long bars of yellow light that fell athwart the lawn, the court, the copse of brilliant, flowering shrubs, and, beyond that, through the little orchard, down the steep bank to where the lazily gliding river terminated the place. At this hour —half past three in the afternoon, the grounds were echoing to the calls of the players, two in number:—"Fifteen love!"—"Thirty love!"—"Thirty-fifteen!"—and then, after several plays,—"Deuce!" given sometimes in a girl's voice, sometimes in a man's clear tenor. They were well matched, those two; for the numbers followed each other regularly, and the games were nearly always won only after protracted vantages, in and out.

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Philip Atkinson, in duck trousers and negligée shirt, and Marion Hunt, in corresponding skirt and a stiffer shirt-waist, had been playing for an hour and a half, and were just beginning the third, crucial set. Marion looked and felt at her best in out-door games. She played every one of them well. She was light on her feet, quick in all her movements, and, when her face was flushed and her hair more or less in disorder, she lost the slightly ordinary look that had always condemned her in Atkinson's eyes.

They were engrossed in the score; and neither noticed the figure that presently appeared upon the side veranda nearest the court, stood there for a moment, looking on, and then moved slowly down the steps and across the grass, to a spot fifty feet from the net, where three or four wicker chairs and a rustic table stood under a clump of white birch trees.

It was Virginia who had come out: Virginia, an exquisite picture in her voluminous white gown, a mass of shirrings and valenciennes lace, with a great Leghorn hat, from which drooped clusters of yellow roses and black velvet ribbon, tilted over her forehead, a yellow work-bag hung upon her arm: the whole costume, unconsciously worn, giving her a quaint resemblance to some olden-time Gainsborough lady. While she advanced, leisurely, she watched the game; and there was a little smile round her lips:—a smile of happiness for Marion who was happy, and another of peace for herself. For the past two months had changed the world again for Virginia Van Studdiford.

As she seated herself in one of the comfortable chairs,

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the front gate clicked, and she turned to see the nurse wheeling her baby up the walk toward the side veranda.

"Bring Caroline to me, Meta," she called. And, obediently, the woman wheeled the pretty carriage toward her, across the grass, saying, in a whisper, as she approached:

"She's asleep, Ma'am."

Virginia rose, moved forward a little, and peeped under the hood to gaze at the baby's plump, rosy little face, hot with slumber. She looked up, smiling, tenderly, and spoke to the nurse:

"Leave her here, please, with me. I'll bring her in when she wakes up."

"She isn't to have her next bottle till five. She's just fell asleep over it, and I took it out of the carriage so she'd not wet her cloak."

"Very well, Meta. I'll bring her in at five if she doesn't wake up before that."

Virginia wheeled the carriage to her chair, turning the hood to the players, that their calls might not disturb the baby's sleep. Then she settled back herself, looked at her work-bag, but did not take out its contents, preferring lazily to watch Atkinson's graceful form as it moved, swiftly, to and fro over the court before her. Ah! What a wonderful thing it was just to be alive!

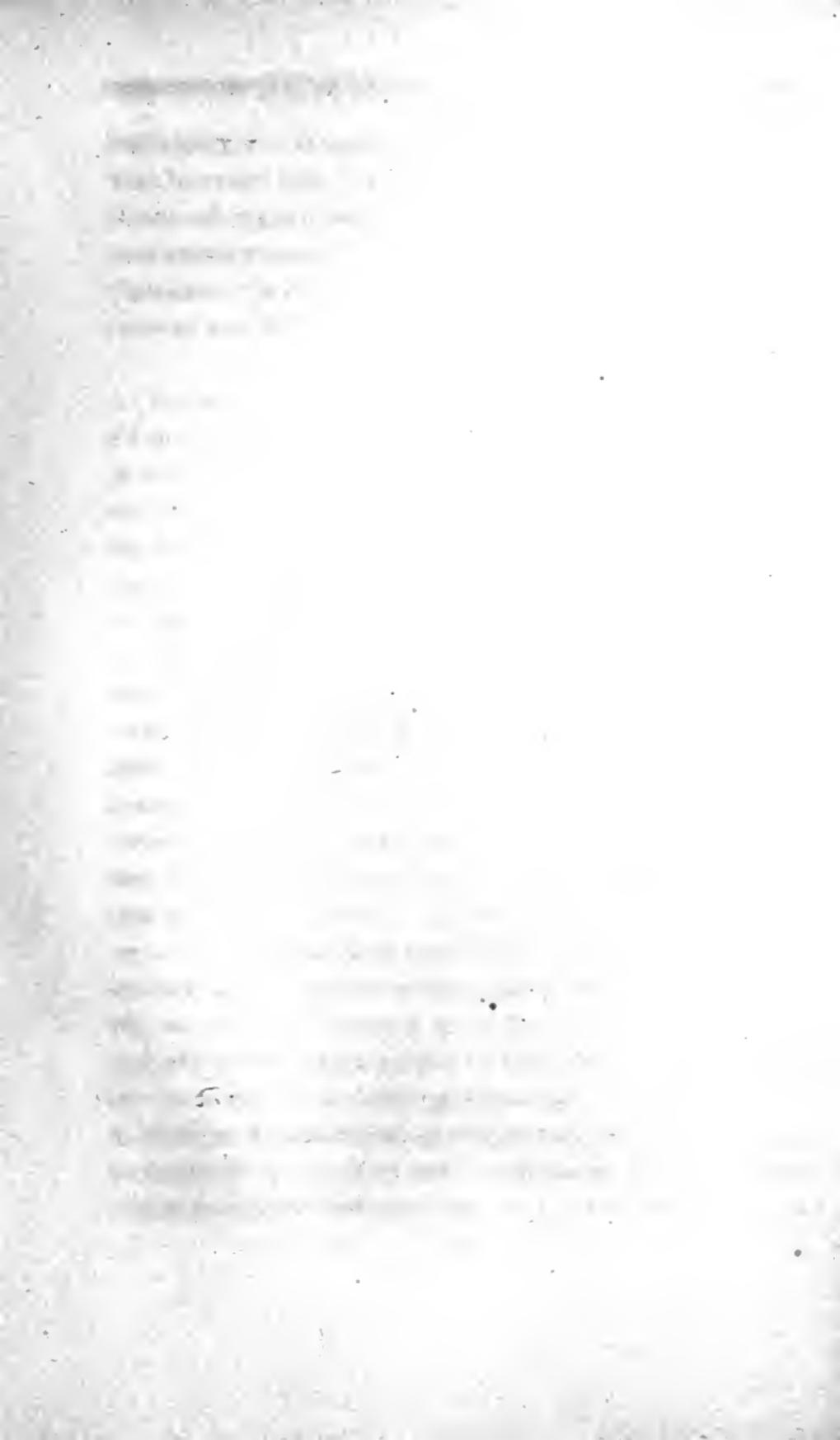
Virginia Merrill had been married a few days more than fourteen months. But the young woman who leaned back in the rustic chair on the grass before the tennis-court, was ten years older, mentally and physically, than the child that had married Charles Van Studdiford, on the fourth day of June, eighteen hundred and ninety-five. In

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that short period she had gone through the iron schooling of half a lifetime. Just at present she was not thinking of it. She had emerged from her recent depths, and it was not now her habit to indulge in introspection. That, too, was the result of the schooling. But, oh! after the first, inevitable rending of the veil, after her first, frightened glance into that unspeakable gulf whence human life and experience must spring, through what unbeautiful phases she had passed! some behind a mask of bitterly simulated indifference, some that even her own pride was powerless to keep from the eyes of those close to her. She had known terror, disgust, helplessness, loneliness, ill-health, worst of all, utter dependence upon a man whom she believed she hated: whom she had tried to hate: whom, just now, she tolerated for the sake of her child. That child, the little, clinging, sweet-faced baby-thing, that loved her arms, had become her anchorage. For the sake of it, for her almighty love of it, she knew that she could, and would, bear infinite burdens. Above all else, Virginia was a Mother. By this, her selfishness had been conquered. She knew, now, why people persist in saying that marriage is good. She had not known the beautiful oneness of love with a strong, tender man. But she had had roused in her the fierce, adoring, protective devotion for a child. Its tiny, helpless, aimless hand had smoothed out the furrows that were becoming habitual to her brow. It had brought a new light into the brown eyes that had grown all but hard. It had surrounded the well of bitterness in her heart with the delicate ferns and starry flowers of love and pity. But more than this it could not do. It



THAT CHILD, THE LITTLE, CLINGING, SWEET-FACED  
BABY-THING . . . HAD BECOME HER ANCHORAGE.



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could not fill that well, nor wholly cover it. Virginia had known real torment of mind and body; and traces of both were inevitably left. But of all these things she would not, now, think deeply. Many of them were matters ever present in her inner consciousness. The rest, consciously or not, she put aside, determining to live only day by day; perhaps, if possible, hour by hour.

The present was agreeable enough. Atkinson had returned again from his wanderings, and was living in his cousin's house as of old, in order to be near his work. Marion Hunt now never refused an invitation from her friend; and Virginia had, long ago, smilingly divined the reason. It pleased her to dwell on this situation; and, whenever it was possible, she planned openings for an expected dénouement. Philip and Marion, married, settled nearby, to be constant companions of her Grangeford life, was a thought almost as pleasant to her as to Marion.—Nay, scarcely that, perhaps; but delightful, at any rate. And there was ground for the strongest expectations. Philip was, unquestionably, devoted. For some weeks, now, Grangeford had been busily watching what it was pleased to call “the Courtship.” And many women and more men than one would have been thrown into utter amazement had Atkinson’s real mind been made known. He was amusing himself in an habitual way. As an actual matter of fact, he had no feeling whatever for Marion, save as rather a sensible and agreeable old maid, who was light on her feet, and could talk well enough to make a dull hour pass acceptably. The dullness of Grangeford was his only reason for tolerating her for five minutes.

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And, even at this period, he felt for her not half the admiration that he had for his cousin's wife. Poor Marion! How was it that she never perceived that her appearance, in not too well-made clothes, cut but a sorry figure beside Virginia, who had the three necessities for dress: money, taste and that peculiar beauty of person that caused her clothes to set her off as delicate ferns enhance a rose.

But, as the last ball fell, Virginia herself was planning Marion's trousseau. She was roused from her reverie by Philip's cry of: "Game *and* set!" and, at the same moment, Van Studdiford appeared at the side door with Carson, who was carrying a great bowl of claret cup, Charles himself bearing two silver dishes of sandwiches and cakes.

Virginia rose and wheeled the still sleeping baby a little farther to one side. The players came up immediately, Marion fastening her collar, Philip rolling down his sleeves; while Van Studdiford superintended the arrangement of table and chairs. In a moment or two Carson reappeared with glasses; and, while his wife reseated herself, Charles served the cup, which he had himself compounded.

"Oh! I could drink all there is in the bowl, and cry for more!" exclaimed Marion, fanning herself violently with her hat.

"My dear lady, there is half a pint of champagne brandy in it. Please wait till I order the landau," exclaimed Van Studdiford, rousing a general laugh.

Marion rapidly disposed of two glasses; whereby her scarlet face grew redder still. Virginia, scarcely thirsty,

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sat sipping hers daintily, feeling, perhaps, that Atkinson's eyes were busy.

As a matter of fact, Philip was looking slowly from Marion's flaming face to Virginia's fair, pale complexion, under the great hat;—and poor Marion's cause was further lost than ever. Atkinson himself, though he had been playing an hour and a half, scarcely seemed hot. He was of the type that is never in any mood or state that does not become him. It was really a matter of instinct, a part of his character, rather than the result of any effort or rule of living. At this moment, indeed, he was pleasantly aware of the fact that, as he contrasted Marion with Virginia, so Virginia was contrasting Van Studdiford with him. But he did not guess that Virginia was doing her best to find something to the advantage of Charles. He would have known, at once, that she must fail. This sort of quest was certainly pathetically vain. For Charles' cheeks were more flushed with the mere effort of breathing than were Philip's after thirty games of tennis. And Philip was more immaculate, in spite of all his exercise, than Charles after a lazy afternoon within doors. But so long as youth persists in judgments by appearance, so long will the world gang all agley.

"What a dull old place Grangeford is!" murmured Atkinson, throwing down his empty glass, and reaching for a sandwich. "Absolutely nothing in the way of amusement. Nowhere to go. Bed at nine o'clock every night, out of sheer desperation."

"I'm used to it," returned Marion, contentedly. "And

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really, we have about as much amusement as anyone, in summer."

"For instance?" asked Virginia.

"Well—the golf club hops. And this Saturday there's a picnic." Marion was delighted that the conversation should be turned to it. "You're asked, of course?—Lawrence Burnwell's, you know."

"Yes. I remember. I'm not sure that I can leave the baby," said Virginia, tentatively, with a quick glance at Charles, who sat perfectly stolid, without the slightest interest in his face. "I want to go," she remarked, suddenly.

"Surely you can—?" Atkinson spoke softly, from a point of vantage near Virginia's feet. "Let me drive you out to the Lake."

"Certainly not!" returned Virginia, laughing. "Old married people shall not monopolize popular bachelors. *I* shall be with Major and Mrs. Pattison, probably. But you, Philip, must take Marion."

"I wanted Virginia to go with me out to the horse farm on Saturday," broke in Van Studdiford, still with an expressionless face. "We're breaking a horse to side-saddle for her, and I want her to see him. That's twenty-four miles in all: enough for one day.—Anyway, picnics! Ugh!—Damned nonsense!"

The conversation died. Nobody cared or dared to resurrect it. Philip, however, was genuinely angry. Marion Hunt! Marion Hunt! Why must she be forever flung at his head, as if his were a proprietary interest? And she was so complacent herself! Really, lately she

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had thrown herself at him. He should stop it, very soon. And Marion, who was watching him closely, guessed his state of mind, if she did not read his thoughts; and thereby her memory of this day, and her hope for the picnic, were spoiled for good. But Virginia, poor Virginia, was more unhappy than either of them. Childish as it was, now that the picnic was denied her she longed for it. Charles himself cared for nothing in the whole world but horses; and, therefore, she must always be forced to waste her few pleasure-hours upon them. She stared at her husband angrily; but he was stretched comfortably in a chaise longue, head thrown back, short mustache bristling, an unlighted cigar in his hand. He was the only untroubled one of the four. Perfectly aware of the unpleasantness he had caused, he was still indifferent to it. In fact, during the last few weeks, all the brute determination in Van Studdiford's character, (and there was much of it), had risen in him fiercely; and he had sworn to himself that he would break his wife to absolute obedience, or break himself in the attempt. He had done it before with a woman. But he had begun to forget the difference in Virginia's breeding from that of the others he had known.

The decidedly uncomfortable silence had lasted long enough. Marion broke it by springing to her feet, with the relieving and expected:

“Well,—I must go. It’s nearly five.”

Atkinson’s expression changed. There was a light of rebellious anger in his eyes. Virginia, however, glanced at him mischievously.

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"I'm so sorry, Marion. It's very early. But if you must go of course Philip——"

"I'll take you home, Miss Marion," broke in Van Studdiford, rising suddenly. "I ordered Meteor and the runabout to be here at five. I'll go and hurry them up." And he strode off toward the stables.

For just one second, Marion's face had fallen. But she recovered herself, swiftly, as Philip rose, all good-nature now. "What a dog Charles is! Horses and—the ladies. One follows the other, doesn't it? He has taken two pleasures from me to-day by means of his animals."

"Nonsense! You know you're relieved not to take that long walk with me." There was a betraying rise of inflection on the last word; but Philip refused to accept her challenge as she wished. His answer, given in an over-elaborate manner: "I assure you I am furious with Charles," would have caused any woman more chagrin than satisfaction.

It was a relief to all three when the *pat-pat-pat* of hoofs on the gravel announced Charles' approach; and as Marion, her hat pinned unsteadily to her roughened hair, started slowly toward the drive with Philip beside her, Virginia sat back again in her chair, and looked lazily after them. Two minutes later the runabout was speeding up the James Road, and Atkinson came back to the scene of the feast, to find Virginia bending over the carriage in which her baby still slept. As he approached, she held up one finger, smiling at him, the while, till she had completed the unconscious beauty of the picture.

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"Caroline's having such a long nap," she whispered. "It's time to take her in, but sleeping is better for her than eating, I think."

"She is adorable!" And Atkinson's thought was not of the baby. He replied, however, only with a smile as she again wheeled the carriage out of the way, and, returning to her former place, sat down and looked up at the graceful figure before her.

"Will you sit here with me till she wakes? Thank you. That's nice. Now, Philip, I'm going to scold. Why in the world do you torment poor Marion so? You make her very unhappy. You should never have asked to drive me out to the picnic, even though Charles wouldn't offer. Of course, you want to go with Marion. You're supposed to!"

For a moment he stared at her, from the seat he had chosen. But, after the most scrutinizing look, he could not deny to himself that she spoke in absolute good faith.

"I asked you to let me drive you to the Lake because I wanted to take you—only you," he answered, simply.

"But, Philip, how ridiculous! I don't in the least count. I am married. You and Marion——"

"Stop, please!—My dear cousin Virginia, Miss Hunt is no doubt a very charming girl. But, personally, I care less for Miss Hunt than I do for the bow on the baby's carriage."

Virginia said not a word. His tone made surprise impossible. It suddenly came to her that she had all along understood just how he felt toward Marion. He, hav-

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ing accomplished what he wished, turned his chair a little and lay back in it, smiling lazily, and looking off across the court and copse to the orchard beyond. Virginia watched him. Her thoughts flew far. And suddenly, without in the least reflecting on the possible effect of her words, she said: "It seems to me, Philip, that a woman might easily fall very, very much in love with you."

He turned, sharply. "What in the world do you mean?—What have they——"

Happily for him, his next words were drowned in a long wail from little Miss Caroline, who had discovered, in the midst of her dreams, that bottle-time had come. Virginia, forgetting everything else, flew to the carriage.

For two or three minutes she busied herself about the baby, crooning to her, in that soothing, incomprehensible language that comes instinctively to Mothers. Then, when the wail was stilled a little, Virginia lifted the lacy bundle in her arms, at the same moment smiling over her shoulder at Atkinson, who had risen. "Philip, play nurse, will you?" she said, laughing. "Do wheel the carriage to the veranda steps for me."

Laughing himself, and mightily relieved at heart at his escape from a mistake that he should bitterly have regretted, he did as she asked. As they reached the steps, he did still more. Virginia's arms were full, and, her long, floating gown being in the way, she paused, uncertainly, before the first of the three steps. Without a word he took the baby from her, and himself carried it up and

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into the house, so gently, so comfortably, that the fretful child did not utter a sound of displeasure. Virginia watched him, marvelling. Van Studdiford could never have done it:—would never have attempted it. Truly, a wonderful cousin was Philip!

## CHAPTER V

THAT year, in Grangeford, summer lingered over Virginia. As the golden days slid imperceptibly along, it seemed to her that time passed as usual; but looking back, afterward, upon this period, she perceived that it had been granted to her as a merciful respite. The long weeks that enwrapped her with sunlight, instilled strength and the power of resistance into her nature, and prepared her, in some slight measure, for the struggle, the pain, the infinite sorrowing of the future. And although she did not, even for a day, leave Grangeford, it being the first time in her life that she had not gone East for the summer, she found that just here, at home, she was learning more of the real joys of country life, the pretty secrets of field and wood and stream, than all the months at Bar Harbor and Narragansett and Manchester-by-the-sea had ever taught her. She was living with and for her baby. Each day the little image was inshrined more beautifully in her heart. Each day the tiny creature became more beloved. And her husband watched her with growing satisfaction as she bathed it, dressed it, walked with it, or hung over its crib at night. He saw that, at length, through the child, Virginia would come to him. He lost his crude desire to break her will by force. And although young babies were a mystery, almost a terror to him, still he was pleased with his daughter for aiding his cause;

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and she held a genuine, though slightly undefined, place in his heart.

August passed silently through the great gate of Past Time; and September flashed in, crowned with red and golden fruits, girdled with purple and white grapes, and robed in sheaves of yellow grain. Sometimes, now, the days were fiercely hot; but soon there lay, hidden in deceiving sunshine, a little, frosty tang. Virginia, driving aimlessly about the country in her low phaeton, nurse and baby beside her, read, for the first time, with seeing eyes, the glory of autumn, and marvelled at the wonder of the woods. And all the time she was facing, tranquilly, almost with joy, the prospect of winter in Grangeford.

In these days Virginia grew beautiful with more than the mere pink-and-whiteness of extreme youth. Her simple mode of life, the natural love she felt, her joy in the open air, and, more than all, her increasing contentment, were writing themselves upon her face. Atkinson, and even Van Studdiford, gazed at her from time to time in wonder, so restful was her presence, so different she from her younger self. Never, perhaps, had miracle of Motherhood been more beautifully wrought; for selfish, frivolous, pretty Virginia had been wholly transformed through the presence of her child.

The person to whom this change was most apparent and most delightful, was Virginia's own Mother. In October Mrs. Merrill came to Grangeford for ten days, to recuperate a little from a difficult summer, and to prepare for a winter more difficult yet. Alas, poor woman! added years were scarcely bringing added rest. The great,

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Michigan Avenue house had again been rented ; and John Merrill, (now almost as much of a child as his granddaughter), his man nurse and his wife, were to begin a new period of wandering, another search after help which, pathetically, all of them, even the invalid himself, knew to be utterly vain.

Mrs. Merrill, older by many years than she had been on the day of Virginia's marriage, yet preserving still, at whatever cost, her charming presence and her infinite tact, found herself a welcome guest in the house of her son-in-law. Charles admired her extremely, and liked to have her at hand, though before her, of all women, he was acutely conscious of certain mistakes in his training.

It was a very happy ten days that Mother and daughter spent together. Mrs. Merrill, seeing Virginia's new peace of mind, forbore to disturb it by any minute details of her Father's condition. Indeed, so far as she could, she tried herself to throw the remembrance of it off, to lay her burden down while she rested, and to interest herself wholly in her daughter's surroundings. Virginia was moved to entertain a little in her Mother's honor : giving a luncheon and a small tea for her. And Grangeford was not backward in returning the invitations. The two ladies, Charles, and Philip, were even asked out to supper several times ; for the town had long since found that none of this family that were accustomed to dine at night, were in any way to be stood in awe of. Mrs. Merrill who, a year before, had forced herself to be interested in these, Virginia's people, now found that they would bear interest of the sincere kind. There was about them a

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straightforwardness, a dignity, a sincerity, quite unknown among the men and women who had once formed her "set" in town. These people did not drink. Not a woman among them had ever dreamed of smoking. There were no flirtations among unmatched husbands and wives. On the other hand, there was such a thing as genuine wit among them. They had also a conventionality of their own: a code almost as strict as, but utterly different from, the laws of fashion in great cities. Such as they were, Caroline Merrill, a true gentlewoman educated in a bad school, liked them, but, more than that, was glad that her daughter's lines had fallen in their places.

There was but one person in Grangeford, and he a member of Van Studdiford's own household, with whom Mrs. Merrill was not wholly pleased, did not, indeed, entirely trust. This was Philip Atkinson: Philip, the debonair, the polished, the charming! She said not a word on the subject to anyone, least of all to Virginia. Sometimes she even wondered at the voice of her own instinct. Yet she found herself watching him, for Virginia's sake, as only a Mother can. And had his conduct toward her daughter, or even Virginia's toward him, ever flown the smallest danger-flag Mrs. Merrill would not have scrupled to carry her plans for change to Charles. But the relationship between the two bore infinite watching. Virginia's attitude was too friendly, too transparently open, for the faintest suspicion to attach itself thereto. And, closely as she looked, Mrs. Merrill never detected in Philip a single trace of what she feared. Yet, because she still doubted Virginia's secret feeling toward her husband, the

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Mother left Grangeford with one, tiny blot upon her happiness : a sense of possibilities.

It was the thirtieth day of October when Mrs. Merrill departed to join her husband at Hot Springs. On the first of November Virginia was suddenly confronted with the prospect of entire desertion for a few days. Charles announced that he was obliged to go West on business : first to Denver, where his sister was ; and then on to San Francisco, for at least five days, in order to examine certain papers belonging to a mine in which he had large interests. He would probably be gone for three weeks ; and gave his wife her choice about accompanying him. With an inward sigh of relief, Virginia explained that she could not possibly leave the baby. And thereupon, at once, of his own accord, Philip prepared to go to Chicago, for a little business and rather more vacation, while his cousin should be away, seizing the same opportunity to visit his sister, Mme. Dupré, who had taken an apartment of her own in the Dirty City for the winter, and declared her intention of reconciling herself to it as a permanent residence.

Philip left Grangeford on the third of November, Charles on the fifth. And on the latter morning Virginia stood in a window of the drawing-room, holding the baby in her arms, to wave her husband goodbye as the runabout dashed away up the road. Then, with a deep sigh of relief, she turned her face indoors, feeling, as she did so, a quick upliftment of the heart. He was not here. Charles was not here ! She could walk suddenly into any room in the house—the library, the smoking-room—and

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he would not be before her, his bald forehead, his red mustache! Oh, exquisite freedom! Oh, miserable Virginia!—most miserable in thy peace!

She carried the baby up to the nursery for its morning bath; and it seemed to her, as she went, that the very atmosphere of the house had changed. There was a sodden weight that was gone from it. *He* was gone. And now, had she chosen either to think or to examine herself, she might have discovered, to a nicety, her feeling for him. But she did not think. She would not examine.

This morning she herself gave the little Caroline her bath; and while she was in the midst of the pretty task, Marion Hunt arrived, demanding to know if she were not miserably lonely. At the question, Virginia laughed.

"Why should I be, please, Marion? At this hour of the day I am always alone; unless you are good enough to come in to see me."

"Oh, but the *sense* that they are gone—Oh, well, I'm glad you don't mind it."

Ah! If Marion only knew what that sense of solitude meant! But, as a matter of fact, Marion herself was the lonely one. This morning she was willing enough to confess that Grangeford was dull. Nevertheless, Marion was still busy being sensible. She was always described as such a "sensible" girl; and the adjective never failed to flatter her. It meant that she understood cooking; that she could make her own shirt-waists; that you could trust her, on going alone to Chicago, to buy only the things she went to buy; and also, last and climactic, that she never fell in love. Perhaps, if Grangeford knew how

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little Marion merited this last opinion, she would never have been called sensible again. Virginia knew, and smiled over the matter, but never told a word of what she had seen; so that the gradual cessation of Philip's attentions was laid, by Grangeford the obtuse, to the door of Marion's own, sensible wishes. And thankful enough was Marion for this mistake. If Virginia knew, this morning, that it was her friend who was lonely and unhappy, she did not betray the knowledge, but kept Marion to lunch, amused her with music and chatter, and sent her home at three o'clock considerably enlivened, though she had refused Marion's invitation to sleep at the Hunt house for the next three weeks.

During the following seven days the young Mistress of the Van Studdiford place had little enough time for blues or loneliness. Half Grangeford came to her with invitations or tacit requests for them. And Virginia tried hard to be polite without having to ask everyone to a meal. She herself should have enjoyed life so much if only they had left her alone; for this autumn she had no dread of loneliness. But, though her every hour was occupied, only one day of her first week proved in any way memorable; and that was the eleventh of November: the last day of unalloyed content that she was to know for many, many years.

It was a Saturday; and, in answer to her invitation, Philip and Mme. Dupré were coming to lunch with her. She had not seen Philip's sister since the May before her wedding. But, in that long-passed visit, she had conceived an admiration for the rather too well known

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woman that she had never forgotten. And as Van Studdiford did not like Philip's only sister, did not, indeed, though he had never said so, care to have her come in contact with his young wife, Virginia made the most of her liberty to continue the acquaintance.

Young Mrs. Van Studdiford spent a good deal of thought, and her cook a good deal of time, over that luncheon. The hour was later than customary:—two o'clock; for Mme. Dupré wrote that she could not come by the earlier train. On their arrival, at the exact hour named, (for Mme. Dupré had the French idea of punctuality,) the Brother and Sister were ushered at once into the dining-room, where iced grape-fruit waited at each place. In the center of the table was a moss mound stuck full of deep red chrysanthemums: a color toning well with Virginia's costume of reddish brown, and harmonizing singularly with the sunny auburn of Mme. Dupré's changeable hair. Philip and Virginia were seated at opposite sides of the square table, with the guest between them. And, gazing across the flower-mound, Philip realized keenly that there was actually one woman in the world comparable to his wonderful sister. But while Georgiana's eyes were deep with the fire of great knowledge of men and the world, Virginia's were wide and clear and too transparent. And where Georgiana's smooth face bore the indelible signs of vivid life, of emotion, of passion, Virginia's rose-leaf skin was still nearly a blank page, open to the pen of Time. And where the older woman talked always with the brilliance and the restraint of infinite experience, the younger was content

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to listen with the open interest and admiration of one unused to and unskilled in the great and dangerous game of the spoken word. Thus, while he looked on, Philip Atkinson suddenly felt rising within him an overweening desire: the desire to participate in the instruction of his cousin's wife in that art of which he was so devoted a disciple, and in which his sister had been an instructress almost as potent as Experience.

While they sat at table, the conversation ranged over a wide list of impersonal topics. But at the conclusion of the meal, when the trio adjourned to the drawing-room, where Madame and her Brother lighted their cigarettes and Virginia seated herself at the piano, letting her fingers wander softly over the keys, through fragrant bits of pianissimo melody that rose like incense at the shrine of the other woman, Georgiana was moved to daring. She came and leaned over the piano, the faint smoke from her lips wreathing itself about her ruddy hair; her large, dark blue eyes gazing searchingly into the delicate face uplifted to hers; and, when her spell was woven, asking, dreamily:

“Are you happy, child, with red Cousin Charles?”

Then, to her astonishment, she found Virginia proof against her. The music never stopped; but the player smiled, bafflingly, into her questioner's eyes. “I wonder who is happy?” was her low reply.

There was a little pause. Virginia sat wondering at her own diplomacy. Georgiana was recovering herself, and, finally, spoke again. “When you desire happiness,” she observed, “I can tell you where it lies.”

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"Can you?" returned Virginia, with the peace of a quiet soul rising to her lips. "I wonder?"

It was a quarter past five when Virginia, having left her guests at the station, returned to the house, alone. She was met at the door by the baby's nurse, who had been anxiously waiting for her release.

"Madam, the baby's sick, I'm sure. She's been took with what acts like a chill. I don't think the milk agrees with her very well. It's likely a little indigestion."

Stopping not even to remove her gloves, Virginia flew upstairs to the nursery, finding the baby there, well wrapped up and lying in her crib. The little face was very white, and the little form trembled, from time to time, with a faint, light cough. Otherwise the child lay very still.

"What in the world shall we do, Meta?" asked Virginia, in a low voice.

"If you could stay by her, Ma'am, I could run for Doctor Hollis."

"Oh! Of course! I never thought of the Doctor. Thomas shall go this instant, with the mare." And Virginia ran away again, a vivid sense of relief at her heart. What sickness could hold against Hollis' gentle skill?

But Doctor Hollis was in the country, at another urgent bedside; and Thomas had not initiative enough to go at once for Haswell. He only left a message with Mrs. Hollis to send the Doctor as soon as he returned. Virginia listened perfunctorily to his report, when finally he returned without help; and then she turned back to

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the nursery, where the baby now lay in a hot fever. For two hours the women worked and sat over the child alone, Meta taking rather a reassuring view of the case, her experience having taught her that a young child can be very ill upon slight cause. Nevertheless, Virginia was badly frightened; and the sight of the Doctor, when, at seven o'clock, he finally arrived, was comforting enough.

Hollis made a thorough examination of the baby, closely questioning both nurse and Mother as to where the little thing had been, what she had eaten, whom she had seen; then he mixed some medicines, gave the first dose himself, and accepted Virginia's invitation to stay to dinner.

"Ah!—I've had nothing since eleven o'clock this morning, Mrs. Van Studdiford; and I'm famished!" he observed, cheerily, as they sat down at table. And it was well that one of them could eat. Though Hollis pressed her further than politeness admitted, Virginia, after three perfunctory spoonfuls of bouillon, sat crumbling her bread, nervously, but did not pretend to use her fork. For a few moments they managed to talk on impersonal matters. But at last Virginia leaned forward, pathetically, and asked:

"What is the matter with her, Doctor?"

For more than a minute Hollis hesitated. Then he answered, quietly: "I hope, Mrs. Van Studdiford, that it is simply a sharp stomach attack. Children, even little babies, are very prone to them, you know."

"You *hope* this?" Virginia's eyes questioned him further.

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"I hope so. It might be one of—well, two other things. At present it is too soon to say. If the fever lessens to-night, she will be perfectly right in a couple of days."

"And that—little cough?"

"Stomach, my dear Lady. Stomach!—Please eat."

But neither that night nor during the following day, nearly the whole of which Hollis spent at the house, did Caroline's fever lessen. By nightfall of the second day it was plain, even to Meta, that indigestion was not the cause of the baby's illness. Moreover, the Doctor had now assured himself which of the other possibilities had become a certainty. The little thing could lie only in one position. If moved in the least from that, she would scream in a tone that pierced the Mother's heart. The faint, dry cough remained; and, though it seemed so slight, it had, from the first, worried Virginia more than anything else; and Hollis, having listened to it carefully, shook his head. The baby, in short, had pneumonia; though how she had taken it, when, or where, Mother and nurse racked their brains to think. Virginia was right, perhaps, when she cried to herself, despairingly: "It is Fate! It is my dreadful Fate!"

All day Sunday Meta and her mistress hung over the crib. Nor could Virginia be persuaded to leave the nursery either to eat or to sleep. Lucy Markle brought food to her, at intervals, on a tray. And at night she slept a little on the nursery couch, while Meta watched; the positions being reversed every two hours.

On Monday, the thirteenth, Hollis came very early in

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the morning ; but later he was forced to set off on a round of country calls. At four in the afternoon Virginia, taking the baby's temperature, found that it had gone down a degree and a half, the thermometer standing at  $101\frac{2}{3}^{\circ}$ . At once her spirits rose, and she cried to Meta, wildly, that the baby was better, and then rushed downstairs to telephone the good news to the Doctor. To her astonishment Hollis, hearing the cause of her rapture, said, in a grave tone, that he would come up, at once. As a matter of fact, though Virginia did not dream it, there could not have been a more alarming symptom. It would have been far better had the thermometer recorded a degree more fever, since night was coming on, and at that time the temperature naturally rises. When he had watched the child's breathing for half an hour, and had changed one of the medicines, Hollis turned, with a solemn face, and asked Virginia to go downstairs with him for a moment. She followed him to the drawing-room, the heart in her breast throbbing, painfully. They sat down, facing each other, in one corner of the room. Jim Hollis cleared his throat, but found it no easier to speak the words that must be spoken to this lonely Mother.

"Mrs. Van Studdiford," he said, beginning, coward-like, at the easiest end of his task, "I should like your permission to telegraph to Chicago, to the Hahnemann Hospital, for a nurse. It will not only lighten your care, but an experienced trained-nurse is almost a necessity, now. If the hardening spreads, we shall have to resort to rather extreme measures: You are willing?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, Doctor! Get two nurses if you like.—

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Doctor Hollis—" She rose, suddenly, her hands clasped tight before her, her face white and strained and old: " Doctor Hollis, you'll—you'll save my Baby for me, won't you?—Doctor—you—I—" "

" Stop it, Mrs. Van Studdiford! Stop, at once! You mustn't break down! I can't have that, you know. The little one will be all right if you don't fail her.—There, there. You see you've been overdoing it, rather.—That's right. Have you got any salts? Good. Now you'll do. But Mrs. Van Studdiford, since you're necessarily nervous—ah—wouldn't it be a help to you to have Charles back? Suppose, now, you let me send a wire to him when I've sent for our nurse, just suggesting that he come on as soon as convenient?"

He paused, looking down at her tentatively. She sat huddled up in her chair, motionless, her face shrunken, her eyes fixed in a stare. " You want Charles to come back? You're sure she can't live?" The tone was hard and rough.

" Upon my soul, no! I certainly think we shall pull her through. But, my dear lady, I have to depend on you, you know. If you allow yourself to go to pieces—Come now, give me Charles' address, for I must be off. Pull yourself together; and the nurse will be here by the earliest train in the morning."

Virginia gave the street and number of the Denver house where Mary was staying, saw the Doctor leave, and then remounted the stairs to the nursery and went over to the bed, wondering if, a week before, she should have thought it possible that the white, pinched,

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frail little creature before her could have been her rosy baby.

The endless night crept by, and the morning of the fourteenth dawned. The baby-wail, feebler than before, now sounded almost incessantly; for the right pleura was affected, and the pain constant and intense. At eleven o'clock the nurse arrived: a quiet, motherly woman, who sent Meta away to sleep at once, and after a time prevailed upon Virginia to do the same.

In the meantime, Doctor Hollis had sent two telegrams on Virginia's behalf: the first to Charles, in Denver, the second to Mrs. Merrill, at Hot Springs, where he had heard she was staying. And by the Fate that overhung Virginia, neither message reached its destination. Charles, taking Mary with him, had already hurried on to San Francisco, not even leaving the name of his prospective hotel with his relatives; and the Merrills, having found Hot Springs overcrowded and uncomfortable, had gone further South, to Georgia; and their telegram lay on the desk of the Hot Springs Hotel till it was finally thrown away.

Wednesday, the fifteenth of November, dragged itself wearily to a close. It had been a raw, gray day; and everyone in the Van Studdiford household rejoiced when the dull light had faded, and the lights could be turned up. In the sickroom a low lamp burned, and the nurse hummed, softly, while she made the preparations for the night. The sound of the tune comforted Virginia a little, as she sat at one of the windows, her forehead pressed against the cool pane. Could the nurse have

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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hummed like that if the baby was in imminent danger? Alas! The nurse could, and did, because of her pity for the pathetically lonely Mother.

All through that night the baby fought for breath. All through the night air was fanned, gently, into her open mouth. But with each short gasp a little strength flowed away; and when, at seven in the morning, Hollis came, he and the nurse searched each other's eyes, and, reading what was written in each, forebore to speak.

On that day, Thursday, the sixteenth of November, Virginia witnessed dreadful things. Twice, in the morning, she saw Miss Morrison, watching the baby's face, seize the delicate little creature by the legs and swing it through the air. Twice the Mother, screaming, rushed to stop it; but each time saw the beloved little form laid tenderly down again, the lost breath forced back, for a little while, into the rapidly closing lungs.

At noon the Doctor arrived, bringing belated oxygen and the apparatus for its use. At once he ordered Virginia to her own room, to eat something and to lie down until four o'clock. Vainly did she beg and protest. He would not hear of disobedience; he would not allow her to remain watching longer. For the moment, then, she surrendered. But, at two o'clock, unable to close her eyes or even to lie still, she crept to the nursery door and knelt before it, listening to the faint sounds from within. Minutes passed. Half an hour. An hour. She never moved. In the agony of her mind she had become quite insensible to time. But she was waiting—for something: what, she scarcely knew. Ah! This was no Vir-

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ginia Merrill! This, alas! was the Mother of a child. She knelt on and on, till the tired muscles stiffened, and her head rested against the frame. Finally, at half past three, the door opened, sharply, and Virginia fell forward across the threshold, in a kind of numb faint.

Hollis picked her up, gently, tenderly, and soothed her like a woman. "I was coming for you," he said, quietly. "You mustn't faint. You're a strong woman; a strong, brave woman, you know."

For a moment or two he waited, while she regained command of her faculties. Then, mechanically, she straightened. "Take me to my baby," she said.

"Yes. Come. I will help you to her."

The day was already passing, and the light in the room was gray and uncertain as Virginia made her progress to the bed. The oxygen apparatus had been laid aside. It had done its work. The little, drawn, shrunken baby could not use it now. Virginia, even while she looked upon her child, perceived that Meta was in the room, tears rolling down her cheeks. Miss Morrison had turned her back upon the scene; but Hollis stood firm, close by.

"Carol—little Carol—Mother's darling," murmured Virginia, very softly; and laid her hands upon the little form. A change passed over the baby-face. Even at this hour she knew her Mother's voice. Instantly, Virginia took her up into her yearning arms, clasping her close, close to her breast. There was a faint, tired cry. Then silence. The little body slowly stiffened, but the Mother did not perceive. For long minutes she remained motionless, her clasp growing convulsive, her lips murmur-

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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ing mother-words. Then Miss Morrison turned again. Hollis stepped forward, and touched her arm.

"Poor child!" he muttered, hoarsely.

Virginia stared at him. Then, swiftly, horribly, her face changed. "What do you mean?" she uttered. A sense, a new, dreadful knowledge, came into her arms. Suddenly she screamed:

"Oh, God! Oh, my God! *She's dead!* Oh, take it away from me! Take it away!"

Hollis got the body from her before she fell.

. . . . .

Night came: the dreadful night, wherein crept upon Virginia the great, lonely terror. Through the dark hours she lay in her brightly-lighted room, with Lucy Markle always at her side, Miss Morrison flitting in and out, Hollis there at least twice.

It was well, indeed, that Hollis was a capable man; for, in that deserted household, the head of it a stricken child, there was nothing but excited confusion. But, quickly and quietly, Hollis made all the black arrangements. Hollis sent innumerable telegrams, reaching Van Studdiford, and even, finally, the Merrills. Further, by merciful means, the Doctor finally put Virginia to sleep. Then, exhausted, he himself went home, eager for the ministrations of his wife, who was waiting for him.

While the Doctor slept, his work went on. From the West coast, where, in the Palace Hotel, Charles was making frantic inquiries about special trains, to distant Augusta, where a brave and sore-tried woman was hurrying her arrangements to leave a sick husband to go to

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

a heart-broken child, many people had been startled by the swift news of the little heiress' death. And yet, through all the morning of the seventeenth, the great Van Studdiford house remained impenetrable to visitors. Virginia would see none but "members of the family." Even the Hunts had been refused; for they came early, when Virginia was scarcely free from the effects of her drug; and she seemed to feel that, in time of trouble, Marion's sensibleness would overpower her sympathy. Thus, by noon, Virginia had seen no one save her maid and the nurse. For no members of the family had yet arrived.

At two o'clock, however, Carson was called, for the hundredth time, to the door, to find a tall, rain-soaked figure standing on the veranda, waiting for admittance.

"Oh! Mr. Atkinson, Sir!—You may come in, please. My orders to admit only the family, Sir."

"I won't ask to see Mrs. Van Studdiford, unless she wishes it. But I shall be glad to stay here to-night—if she wants me. Charles can't arrive for sixty hours more at best. Take my coat, Carson. Have it dried. No. Leave the box."

"If you'll step into the drawing-room, Sir. Madam's upstairs, I think. I'll take your message."

Carson disappeared, with the wet coat, and Philip turned to open the box he had brought with him. He took from it a great, flat bouquet of white carnations, from which hung long streamers of satin ribbon. Few men could have trusted themselves to carry such a thing. But he had brought it as his tribute to Virginia. To him it harmonized with her grief and the cause of her grief; and

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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he thought little of his manner of bearing it as he entered the silent drawing-room. For there was, in Atkinson, a vein of real sympathy and tenderness that few men would have comprehended.

The drawing-room, its shades pulled down, was wrapped in gloom. Philip, coming from gray daylight, could at first see almost nothing. He moved, by instinct, to a sofa, and seated himself, gazing reflectively at his flowers. Presently he started to his feet again. The drawing-room was not empty. Someone was certainly here. Someone had moved.—Someone had sobbed.

Out of the shadows at the far end appeared the black-robed figure of a woman. He had a moment's glimpse of a white, haggard face, framed in rich hair. He saw a slender figure, almost swaying as it approached him. He heard the high note of relief in the broken voice that cried:

“ Philip !”

The carnations dropped from his hand. He started forward, reached her, and caught her in his arms, enfolding her tightly, till she felt herself protected, even comforted a little.

“ Oh, Philip !” she moaned again. And, like a tired child, she laid her head upon his shoulder.

They stood thus, in the darkness, for a full minute. Then she perceived that his hand was laid upon her hair: that the touch was a caress. She lifted her head a little, and looked into his face. Another moment. Then, slowly, —irresistibly—he kissed her on the lips.

And still she stood there, spell-bound, while, from her

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*THE FIRE OF SPRING*

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heart, through all her veins, came a slow, fierce fire, upward-creeping : the fire which, at the same instant, the instant of the kiss, had been kindled in their two souls, and was not to be extinguished till the Great Divider had laid His knife between them.

“ Philip—oh, Philip ! ” she murmured, again, in the darkness.

## CHAPTER VI

VAN STUDDIFORD did not get home until the day after the funeral. Perhaps, had he arrived in the midst of all the outward tumult of grief, the meeting between him and Virginia might have done the work of bitter years, in the way of softening the relationship between them. As it was, his coming could not have been worse timed. Virginia, relieved of the unbearable strain of being alone in the house with her baby's empty frame: Virginia, surrounded by a loving group, her Mother, the Hunts, Doctor Hollis, Mme. Dupré and Atkinson, had now sunk into a state of utter apathy. With this she met her husband. And Van Studdiford, whose grief was more one of lost potentiality than of any heartfelt sorrow, betrayed toward her no outward emotion, and himself felt little but an inward apathy. Reaching Grangeford at 11.40, he lunched at home, and left for the factory at a quarter past two, wondering why in the world he should have been summoned so peremptorily to drop important business and come back to a home where he was not needed. Certainly Virginia did not need him.

Ah! What a crying pity that the wife should not have been still alone, and in her first grief, when he came back to her! What a misfortune that seventy-two hours'

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delay must be atoned for by a quarter as many years of wretchedness on both sides! But, as it was, the situation that slowly developed was inevitable.

Mrs. Merrill remained in Grangeford for a fortnight; and during that time rather a remarkable change took place in her own mental attitude with regard to her son-in-law and his cousin. Hitherto she had strongly distrusted Philip, and had felt, if not real affection at least a great respect for and confidence in Charles, and all that he did. His present behavior was rapidly changing this. She saw him, apparently quite unmoved by the baby's death, short, silent, wrapped in his business, leaving Virginia, from morning to night, entirely to her own resources. On the other hand Philip, who was respectful almost to the point of formality, contrived to spend considerable time with the two ladies, and, in that time, his attitude of sympathy, consideration, tact, and gentleness, was so perfect, so above reproach, that Mrs. Merrill, herself unhappy and depressed, could not but take pleasure in his society. And because of this, how should she not forget all that evil tongues had said of him? the tales of a discreditable business life; the whispered stories of his love-affairs, her own former instinct of distrust? How could she counsel Virginia still to beware? And how could the daughter, quickly perceiving her Mother's attitude, help slipping into the habit of dependence on Philip's company, and do her best to forget that one incident of the kiss, the mere thought of which could still send her into a panic of suppressed feeling?

In the last week of November Mrs. Merrill was obliged

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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to return to Augusta; and Virginia was left alone to face another country winter. Ah! What had not fifteen short days done with her pretty, tranquil life? And yet, grieve as she did, sincerely, the bereaved wife could not but realize in her own heart that she was less utterly dreary than she had been at the same season the year before. It is possible that she would not have admitted this aloud. And it is certain that she endured many long, lonely, broken-hearted days. But Mrs. Van Studdiford was not yet twenty years old. And, bitter as it had been, how could her short experience have been expected to kill all the elasticity, the spirit, the everlasting, bubbling, sparkling force of youth at nineteen? Moreover, Virginia was in excellent health. She had now no reason for the morbid depression fostered by her condition of a year before. She missed her baby terribly; for she had been a true and loving Mother. But she was not yet of an age to have reached the state of assurance that a tranquil home life, the love of husband and children, is, after all, the only true and lasting happiness. Poor Virginia did not love her husband: had been robbed of her child. What, then, was her future? What awaited her in that black beyond? Ah—youth stood at her elbow, urging. Love lurked in the distant shadows—that love whose face she had not yet seen. But his low song was already audible, and—she listened. In all her life, Virginia had known but one real kiss. By that, a fire had been kindled within her, burning faintly as yet, but in need only of the slightest encouragement to rise in an all-consuming flame.

The Van Studdiford household had, of course, gone

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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into mourning. Charles wore crape on his sleeve and hat, and exchanged his red tie for a black one. His wife was in black, and bands had been sewed upon the plum-colored liveries of the footmen. Virginia had never before owned a black garment; and she was still unaware that it was more becoming to her than any color. True, there were few to see her in it; for this was the gay season in Grangeford, and every one was planning or going to entertainments from which she was, as a matter of course, excluded. She had many calls of condolence; but to most of these, with her usual shyness, she denied herself. Once more, then, as a year before, she was thrown upon her own resources: Marion and music. Doctor Hollis was not needed now; but he had a substitute—one who rather more than filled his former place; one who should not have filled it at all: the third member of the Van Studdiford household.

At the present time, Atkinson was as much a part of the household as he had been before his cousin's marriage. He was working very steadily this winter; and Charles watched him with real satisfaction, perceiving that nowadays he went rarely to Chicago, and that in more than two months he had not, for a single night, been unaccountably absent. Atkinson was, perhaps, as much surprised as any one at his growing interest in Grangeford affairs. If he had an interest, a keen interest, in the house in which he lived, he never questioned himself upon the subject. He knew that he was in the delightful stage of daily discovery; and he was too much of an artist to hasten matters, or to indulge in any sort of self-analysis. In his garden was the tender green of a new plant, and he was

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content to let nature keep the place of gardener. Incident and circumstance, the sunshine and the rain of growing love, must feed this passion-vine: must, little by little, bring a bud thereto, and develop it into the perfect-petalled flower. And who, understanding it, could have the heart to hurry a process so exquisite?

The object of Philip's dreams and delusive metaphors, to do her justice, was perfectly unconscious of them, and also of the imminent danger of her own state of mind. Yet, by her unwillingness to indulge in any introspection, Virginia was, unquestionably, open to some sort of reproof. She was pursuing an uneven, nay, an eccentric course; but she asked no advice, even of herself, concerning her road. She was passing through a dangerous stretch, leading from the valley of quiet sorrow up to the wild and lofty heights of unnatural happiness. Day by day, if she would but notice, she could perceive the situation defining itself. But it was not till after New Year's, in the January of 1897, that she found herself taking deliberate action. Then, by means of a little series of accidents leading up to a scene long desired by the man, everything became clear.

It was a bitter cold day toward the middle of the month. Van Studdiford was away: had gone, that morning, to Chicago, and was not to return before seven in the evening at the earliest. Philip, of course, was at the factory; but, as he left the house after luncheon, Virginia had asked him, laughingly, if he would not come home to take tea with her, that afternoon, at five o'clock. She had had little idea of his taking the invitation seriously;

## ===== THE FIRE OF SPRING =====

but when he accepted it she experienced a sensation of very real pleasure. At two she went to her room, lay down, and fell asleep, not waking till four. Opening her eyes she found Lucy standing by the bed, with the announcement that Miss Hunt had called, and was waiting downstairs to know if she could see Mrs. Van Studdiford. It was on Virginia's lips to have her shown upstairs when the remembrance of her prospective tea-party came back.

"Oh, I'm—sleepy, Lucy," she said, petulantly. "Tell Miss Hunt that I'm not awake yet and you can't disturb me."

"Yes, Madam." And Lucy, thinking nothing of the message, slipped away, leaving Virginia staring up at the ceiling, wondering why in the world she had yielded to that impulse.

In a moment or two the maid was back again, moving softly about the room arranging her Mistress' dinner gown and the details of the toilet. Virginia lay silently watching her till, having finished, she turned to ask: "Will you sleep again? Shall I have Carson serve tea in your room, Madam?"

Then Virginia jumped up, suddenly. "No. No!—Is it late?—Mr. Atkinson's coming to have tea with me, at five o'clock. I want it served in the drawing-room. Dress me quickly.—What am I to wear?"

"I think, Madam, that Mr. Atkinson admires you in the black lace Princesse gown."

Virginia looked at her sharply. "How do you know what he admires?—that he admires me?" she demanded.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Lucy lowered her eyes. "Everyone admires you, Madam."

For a moment or two Virginia continued to stare. Then her face broke into a smile. "Well—bring the black lace, then.—Oh—I wish I could wear something beside black or white, just for an hour!"

"Black is the most becoming thing you can put on," ventured Lucy, retiring to the wardrobe. And the conversation closed.

It was, however, notable that, particular as Lucy always was about her Mistress' toilets, she was not, upon this occasion, as anxious as her lady appeared to be to achieve something unusual. It was the first time that Virginia had seriously considered Philip's possible admiration. Probably it was as yet nothing more than the wakening of a latent instinct of flirtation; with which she should have been familiar enough to have cast it aside upon her wedding day. It was actually, however, something that she had never known until to-day; and, now, dangerous situations were less apt to be feared than ignorantly courted. Even during the half hour of dressing, Virginia discovered and enjoyed sensations of which, to be sure, she had read, perhaps dreamed, but which she had scarcely believed could form a part of real life. And, when Lucy had finished her, and she stood before her long, cheval glass, she kept her maid busy for some time following out last suggestions; for it was the first time since Mrs. Van Studdiford's wedding day that she had been thoroughly interested in the result of Lucy's labors.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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At a quarter to five Virginia, having herself given Carson the instructions about tea, went into the drawing-room, walked to the far end of it, and seated herself, in the dusk, at the piano. To her extreme surprise, she was nervous. Her hands lay cold upon the keys; her heart was beating unsteadily. Yes. She was nervous;—because Philip Atkinson was coming home to take tea with her! Cousin Philip, whom, for six months, she had thought of as just a member of the family! What in the world had changed him so, in her eyes? She could not think.—She would not think. But it was a long train of incidents, insignificant in themselves, taking their root in what was not insignificant. They had sprung from darkness. They were embedded in—a kiss. *The kiss.*

Virginia sat quite still, her head bowed over the keys, waiting till the dusk had died. Then she rose and turned up a light in the hand of a bronze figure beside the piano. Immediately thereafter Carson brought in tea, arranged it on the usual table beside her, and retired, without a word.

It was past five. Philip had not come. Ah! He had forgotten all about it! Of course! He was at the factory. He was busy—as busy as Charles. And she—she was a—*fool!* Bitter tears trembled on her lashes, and the affair might have ended valuably. But, just then, the front door opened and shut. There were hurried steps through the hall, toward the stairs; and Virginia knew that it was Atkinson. Already his step distinguished itself to her. The tears went back, swiftly; but the delay had served to restore her own composure, and part of

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her common sense. Now she poured out her own tea, and was sipping it, tranquilly, when Atkinson, clean, well-brushed, easy as usual, came in, closing the door after him. He walked slowly down the room, his lips curved into a slight smile. The color crept up Virginia's cheeks as she read the comment in his eyes. She did not rise, as she held out her hand, which he carried to his lips, with an air so ceremonious that she could not protest. Then he seated himself opposite her, and, waiting for his tea, began to talk, gayly. Under the lightness of his tones Virginia's second embarrassment melted away; and she answered him in kind, relieved that he had been able so easily to remove the strain, and yet half wishing that he might allow it to return.

It did. Atkinson kept up his banter till the little meal was over. Then, as she moved instinctively to the piano, he stood in the little curve on the right side of the instrument, and watched her. She played, softly, that rich, low, stately melody that opens the étude number 3, opus 10, of Chopin. And the music wove its spell about them both, not more upon her than him, for his temperament was markedly impressionable.

"How long—have you been able—to play like that?" he asked, at last, slowly.

She smiled. "I don't know. Anyone can play Chopin:—anyone, I mean, that loves him well enough."

"And could you also play upon anyone whom you—loved enough?"

Deliberately she lifted her eyes to his. Her answer, whether she intended it or not, was in the look.

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"Virginia!" he murmured.

The melody died. Her hands lay quiet in her lap, till he came and lifted one of them. Then, overcome with a quick dizziness, she rose, suddenly. And, as suddenly, he caught her in his arms, and kissed her again—and twice—and thrice, till, with a cry, she escaped from him, and ran out of the room.

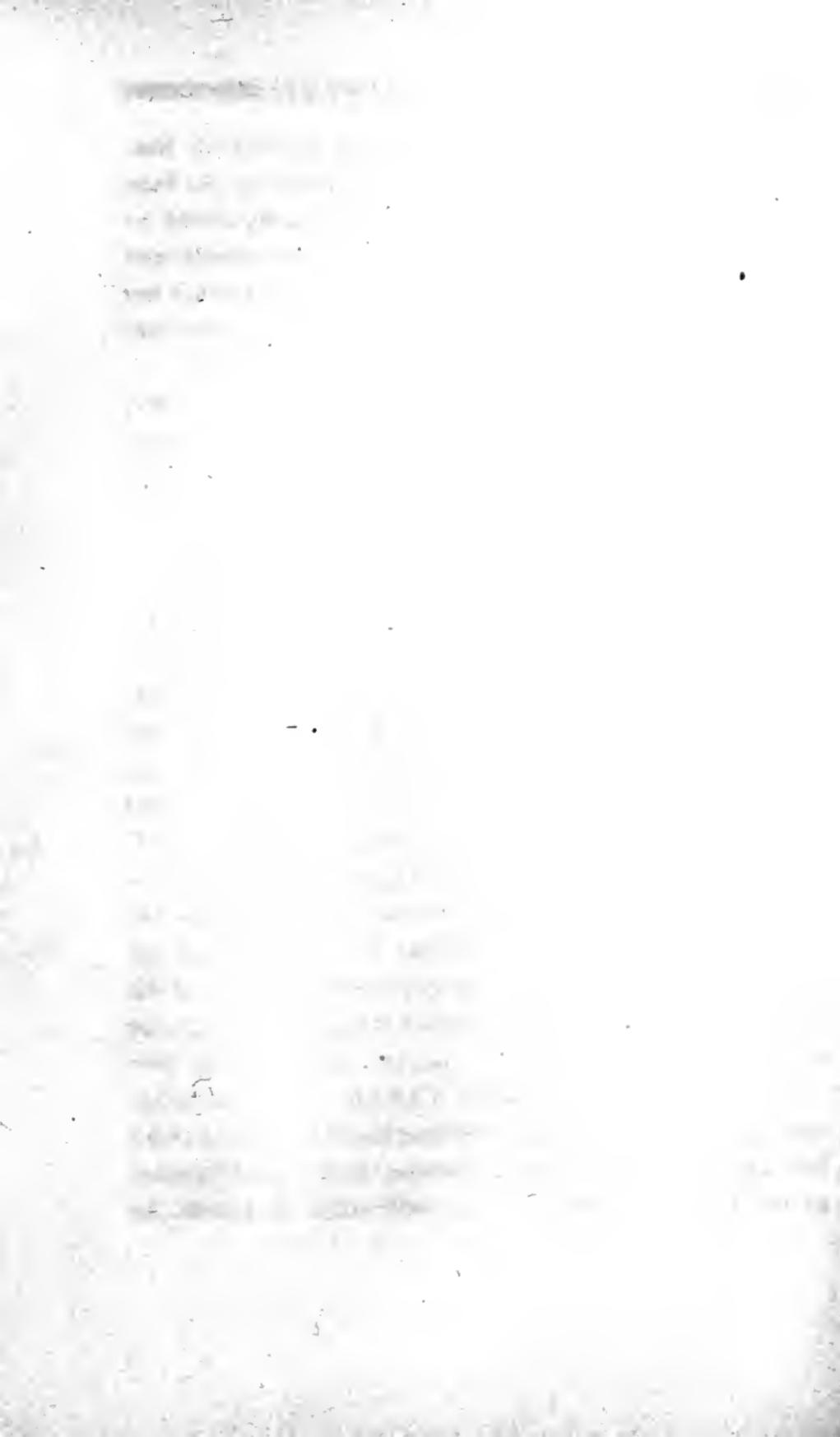
Atkinson remained just where she had left him. He was amazed at himself. He had not in the least intended to do what he had done. And, question himself as he would, he could not perceive how he had come to make so precipitate a mistake. Was it possible that he—he, a veteran, a skilled artist in this sort of work, could have lost his head? Absurd! But, at least, it should never happen again:

That this last resolve of his was kept, was more to his credit than might be supposed. It is true that he had long since perfected himself in the delicate game of pretended love. There were very few women whom he could not influence exactly as he chose. But all the secret of his power lay in the fact that, though he was a man of strongest passions, he had hitherto found himself incapable of a serious attachment. He could always admire any woman whom he took the trouble to captivate. He had never, he himself declared, loved one of them. And now, at the age of thirty-three, he had found, in a country town, a child of nineteen with whom—he was not sure of himself. Preposterous!—Delightful!

In the weeks that followed, he watched himself closely; and he discovered that he was not infallible: that perhaps,



HE CAUGHT HER IN HIS ARMS, AND KISSED HER AGAIN.



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since, after all, there was such a thing as love for him, it would be more than worth while to cultivate it. At least —either—he ought to go away ; or, so infinitely easier, he ought to stay, fling every better feeling to the winds, and take that which awaited him. But it was a situation not much to his taste. Van Studdiford was—his cousin ; and far too much his benefactor.

It was this state of vacillation in one hitherto perfectly sure of himself, that produced the strange situation existing in the Van Studdiford house during February and half of March. Philip was giving expression to each fleeting mood ; and Virginia, with a nature as impressible as smooth wax, recorded each by her own behavior. Truly, they were not very happy in each other. After his every smallest betrayal of feeling for her, Atkinson's other nature forced him into battle with himself. Years of self-assurance, of indulgence in his every whim, had weakened his character : how incredibly, he was just discovering. Even now it was hard to believe that he could not, if he chose, have in one day escaped from his self-forged fetters. It needed many attempts to show him how fast he was bound. And all that those about him perceived or thought of him was, that he had worked very well for some months, and was now simply showing a natural reaction. Frequently, and always without any notice, he disappeared, and, for a day or two at a time, was lost, presumably in the wilderness of Chicago. The presumptions were correct enough. His old haunts began to know him again. People, men and women, now looked forward to his coming. Out of a sardonic sense of humor, he

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hunted up Muriel Howard—still living in an agreeable retirement and visible to very few, of whom, however, Atkinson seemed always to be one. In her company, many resorts saw him; and, after each plunge into infamy, there returned to Grangeford a miserable man, who avoided Virginia Van Studdiford out of very shame.

Finally, after a month or two of this, Philip began to perceive that, by a contrast of his own devising, the woman he wished to forget was becoming daily more exquisite, more pure, more desirable in his eyes. And so, for a fortnight, from the first to the middle of March, he worked in Grangeford steadily, indulging himself, out of hours, only in certain newly-suggested forms of worship at his consecrated shrine.

During these two weeks Virginia knew, at last, some peace of mind. What she had endured during the month of February, went untold. It had been worth a year of schooling in the world. For, in his zeal after self-repression, it had not occurred to him to consider the possible effect of his eccentric methods on the woman he cared for. He never knew what she endured at each disappearance. Had he guessed, it would only have been a delight to know that she could suffer thus through him. He was too selfish to pity her: to be remorseful that every slighting reference in regard to his absence from the lips of Van Studdiford, Hollis, even Marion Hunt, who found time to be caustic-tongued nowadays, should be a knife-thrust in her heart. Long, long afterwards, indeed, when at last she could bear to remember this period at all, all that Virginia could recall of it was the many, long after-

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noons spent in her own room, in pretended sleep. She got into this habit of retirement for the sake of being alone. Even Lucy Markle was not permitted to disturb her. And here, on her bed, sleepless and anxious, she would lie meditating, trying to impress upon herself her only rightful line of procedure. Hour after hour she spent gazing straight before her, out of her Southern window, up a short stretch of snowy road which used to reflect, in sunshine and shadow, every phase of the day till, at length, the patch of sky at the road's end was filled by the glory of the setting sun. And this lonely country outlook became afterwards inextricably interwoven with all the unhappy doubts, all the daring joys, of her perplexed imagination. Many events of moment to her took place upon it; and in the end, by night, it was always along this road, lengthened, perhaps, by endless miles, that Philip came back to her forever.

March came in, on a wild burst of wind. And now, with the cessation of Atkinson's wanderings, a kind of desultory happiness was, for a brief season, renewed. He sought Virginia frequently; and his manner toward her had in it almost a pathos. In their relationship all was indefinite, intangible; but their conversation habitually ran along the borderland of danger. Neither one of them, however, permitted it actually to cross the frontier. There were no kisses now. They talked together in full light, often in the presence of others. No one could ever have surprised them at an awkward moment of the tête-à-tête. But the greater their care, the stronger the realization, on their part and on that of Lucy Markle, that the affair was

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serious. It would have been impossible to go on in this same way for another month without development.

Fortunately, or, as they believed, unfortunately, this possibility was prevented by a prospective change, arranged by one who was falling into the power of an inscrutable, guiding Providence. On the morning of the fifteenth of March, when Atkinson, half an hour late, entered the factory, he was summoned at once to his cousin's private office, where, after a little preliminary, he was told that he was to start West on the following Thursday, in company with a young engineer, Henry Fürst, proceeding directly to Phoenix, Arizona, and thence, a few weeks later, to Sacramento, to examine plans and let contracts at those points for branch houses to be devoted especially to the manufacture of the gigantic plows used in Western grain-fields.

Atkinson was in the office for two hours. When he came out, he should have understood what had been in his cousin's mind for a month. As it was, all that he really grasped was the fact that, in just three days, he was to leave Grangeford for a period of not less than six weeks. And the utter dismay with which that reflection struck him, should also have shown how necessary it was that he should go. But he felt that he himself did not dare tell Virginia. If he were to see, written on her face, any of the feeling that lay in his own heart, he knew that he should not be able to trust himself. As it came about, then, Virginia learned the news next day, at luncheon, from Van Studdiford. Nor, during the remainder of the meal, could anyone have perceived any special change

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in her expression or her manner. She did not, perhaps, realize, till considerably later in the day, how much that plan of her husband's was going to affect her. And when she did perceive it, she only lay perfectly still upon her bed, staring out and up to that bit of muddy road, above which scurried masses of gray, jagged clouds.

Atkinson was to leave Grangeford early on the morning of Thursday, the eighteenth of March. This Virginia heard on Tuesday. Of the intervening day and night neither she nor Atkinson remembered much. And in the manner of their eventual parting she had absolutely no hand: did nothing more than acquiesce. He arranged it all, taking comfort in the fantastic beauty of his idea: wanting nothing more than was given. Wednesday evening dragged, dolefully. The trio, Charles, Philip and Virginia, sat silent in the drawing-room, Charles reading, Philip trying hard to fasten his mind on some necessary papers, Virginia pretending to sew. From half hour to half hour two of the three wondered why Charles did not go to the library, where all his evenings were accustomed to be spent. Virginia asked herself, drearily, if she should be obliged to say good-bye before him. Her face grew quite white with dull, inward anger. When, at half past ten, he had still not moved, she rose, in desperation:

"I am going upstairs," she announced, petulantly.  
"Good-night, Charles."

"Oh—are you?—Good-night."

Philip had risen when she did. He waited, while she

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

brushed her husband's forehead with her lips, and then, quite naturally, followed her into the hall.

"Surely you are going to say good-bye to me?" he demanded, aloud.

The door shut, behind them. He took her hand. "Forgive me," he began, hurriedly. "I want to see you alone—for three minutes. Go to your room and wait. I shall follow you in a quarter of an hour.—May I?"

She looked at him for one moment, hesitating. But his eyes met hers honestly. Then she smiled, and murmured, faintly: "Yes!" After that, she was gone.

Lucy Markle was waiting upstairs, as usual, to put her to bed. But the room! When Virginia saw it, she stopped still, astounded. The bed was loosely covered with meteor roses. The low mantel-piece was banked with them. They lay scattered on the carpet. They had been flung across the dressing-table, the window-seat, the desk. The whole room breathed the fragrance of the crimson velvet flowers. And in the midst of them, a white lace garment thrown across her arm, stood Lucy, staring at her mistress anxiously.

"Lucy, who did this?"

"I, Madam, if you please."

"You!—Bah!—Who sent them?"

Lucy's head drooped. "My orders, Madam, were from Mr. Atkinson."

"Ah!—How *dared* you take orders from anyone but me?"

"Oh, Madam! Forgive me!—I thought——"

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Virginia silenced her by a gesture. She turned, examining the room with a straightening mouth. Then, contemptuously sweeping the flowers off one of the chairs, she seated herself, wearily, and let her head fall back, while Lucy stood gazing at her, in anxious uncertainty. The pause lasted for two or three very uncomfortable minutes. Then Virginia opened her eyes again.

"I suppose he also told you how—you were—to let him in? Put away that—thing you have got, and—go!"

"I beg your pardon, but—I—to let him in?"

Virginia gave some sort of angry ejaculation. Why must she thus be made to decide this thing? After a little, however, seeing that Lucy did not move, she managed, a second time, to whisper: "Yes." And Lucy, with a smile and a return of alacrity, hurried away.

Left alone, Virginia's mood changed. After all, the idea of the roses had been like him: beautiful, reckless, dangerous. Suppose Charles should come in just now? She started up, terrified, and locked her door from the inside. At the same moment the sound of footsteps reached her ears, and she turned, just as Atkinson halted on the boudoir threshold.

He was smiling, joyously, and, examining the room, saw that his idea had been well carried out: that one flower was even clinging to the lace sleeve of her gown, held there by its thorn. But his smile faded when his eyes reached her expression.

"You are not pleased?" he asked, softly.

"Philip! Philip! How reckless it is! How am I to get rid of them?"

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"What does it matter? You are to be rid of me sooner."

She could not answer in words; but the sudden change in her face encouraged him.

"Virginia—haven't you a word for me?"

At last the answer was all that he wished. She was in his arms.

There were but two or three minutes more; a few kisses, some incoherent phrases, tears hot from her eyes on his face, some suggestion of letters. Then, with gentle delicacy, he had pressed her hand tight to his lips, and was gone, returning by the way he had come.

Virginia was alone. Stooping, she lifted from the floor one perfect flower that his feet had touched. This she wrapped in a soft handkerchief, and laid in a drawer of her desk. Finally, she summoned Lucy from the little room beyond her boudoir.

"You must take everyone of these roses away, to your own room. Then, in the morning, early, get rid of them in some way. Come back when you have taken them all out, and undress me."

And, as Lucy set to work, Virginia threw herself again into the chair and stared about the empty room so infinitely empty now.

## CHAPTER VII

USUALLY Virginia, like all young and healthy people, was an easy sleeper. That night, however, it was three hours past midnight before consciousness would leave her. She tossed and turned and burned upon her bed, tortured with the thought that Philip was still in the house, and that in less than twelve hours he would be irrevocably gone. She longed for day, while she also dreaded it; unspeakably. The thought of Grangeford without a companionship that had grown to be so much to her, was unendurable. She put it from her again and again. Finally, from sheer exhaustion of all thought, she fell into a feverish sleep, which, as the hours passed, grew quieter.

It was ten in the morning before she opened her eyes, to find Lucy standing beside her bed with a tray on which was a small pot of coffee, a pitcher of hot milk, two rolls, and the usual egg. For a moment or two she stared dully at her maid, groping for the meaning of the weight at her heart. In a moment it came. Philip had gone. By now Philip was far on his way to Chicago, and so out, into the distant West. There could be no longer any interest in any day for her. Cold water woke her thoroughly; and she returned to her nest to play, drearily, with her food, till, when she had finished, Lucy returned, bearing with her a great bowl of red roses. At a little dis-

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tance from the bed the maid halted, asking, with her eyes, for approval. Virginia smiled.

"Are they fresh roses?" she demanded, softly.

"No, Madam. I saved them from the others. If you—do not wish them——"

"Put them there—on my desk.—Now help me to dress."

The morning was cold and blustery-gray. Virginia's spirits were at lowest level when, half an hour later, she wandered downstairs. How big, and empty, and desolate the house was! Heavens! Why had she not thought so before? And why did no one come to see her? Surely Marion might have been there oftener than she had, of late. Surely—What was it, in Virginia's thoughts, that brought her to a standstill? Five minutes of hesitation, and then she ran to the telephone.

Yes, Miss Hunt was in. Presently she was at the wire, but her preliminary "Hello!" froze all the warmth out of Virginia's voice. No. She was afraid she should be unable to come out this morning. She was extremely busy. This afternoon? Well, she hardly knew. Really, she had so much to do—you see—well, perhaps, if Virginia insisted, she would try to run in just for a moment about four o'clock. But she couldn't say positively.

Virginia's good-bye was short, and she walked slowly back into the drawing-room with a new expression on her face. What *was* the matter with Marion? True, she had scarcely seen her friend for the last month or so; but, till to-day, she had not thought about it. It had not occurred to her to want Marion before. Now, suddenly, she

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began to want her very much. Was it possible—could it be possible—that she thought anything wrong?

After an unpleasant hour, the young wife seated herself at her piano, and remained there till luncheon-time. But she found that she could not play away the load upon her heart. That, alas! had come to stay.

Though Virginia, inexperienced in the ways of offended womanhood, had begun to doubt, Marion did come to see her that afternoon, arriving about half past three; and the call, begun in constrained formality, really ended in renewed friendliness. For Marion did not "know anything," and her cause of offense rose largely from a feeling of pique that the Van Studdiford house had not been open to her lately; and, added to this, there was a faint suspicion about Philip which Virginia's manner went far toward dispelling. By this, and one or two more visits, the old relationship was resumed; and, though she was this time unconscious of it, Marion served again in her old rôle of stop-gap: dispeller of Virginia's loneliness.

The succeeding days were long and dull. Virginia had passed many like them in that house, but never with the same memories and the same dreams to make them difficult. If, up to the hour of his departure, she had rather played at being in love with Atkinson, or, perhaps, just at having him in love with her, she very soon perceived that separation had turned that pretense into reality. A hundred times a day she found her heart flaming up at thought of him. A hundred times a day she yearned to look at him, to hear his voice, to feel the pres-

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sure of his hand. She was uneasy and restless. All her pretty, natural pallor came back, and with it a little more that was not natural. She even lost something of her round contour, but not enough to make it noticeable.

By the time April came in Virginia found that there was another consolation, another occupation, given her. On the second of the month, two weeks after he had left, she had her first letter from Philip. It was a curious epistle: like, and yet unlike, the man. He, at any rate, had never before written one like it. It had been done not at all for effect, but because he found, to his astonishment, that she had fastened herself so upon both mind and heart that he could not resist the desire to give expression to some of the thoughts that he dared not confide to any acquaintance, much less his staid companion, Fürst. And the mailing of it, after long consideration, was due to a wish to make her think about him. He would have been well satisfied had he known how that letter was received: how Virginia pored over it, read and re-read it, and came to know the words so by heart that she never perceived how some of them had been worn illegible. It began abruptly: it ended without signature. But it was a love-letter, and she asked no more than that.

“PHœNIX, March 29th.

*“I have tried for days not to write to you. I know that it is better not; but I am in extremis. I yield as easily to the memory of you as I have yielded to your presence. You are the first woman to have conquered me:—miserable I, that I should say it! How shall I find*

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*words in which to express all that I dare not say to you? Three little ones are at the point of my pen, as a thousand times they have lain upon my lips. Have I said them, incomparable Virginia?"*

He had, indeed, said them, and yet the woman was loath to let herself believe it, so anxious was she that it should be so. She had come to want them so much, his three words, from himself, to hear them spoken in his low, intimate tone, to know that he said them because, in truth, he could not help it, that an evasion like that in the letter could not now satisfy her desire.

It was a week before she actually sent an answer to him. How many letters she had written in that time it would be vain to count. She had discovered the last delight of loneliness; and she indulged it thoroughly. Yet of all the letters that she allowed herself to write, the one that she finally sent was the briefest, the coldest, the most dignified, the only one in which she had not fully revealed her mind, or, rather, her heart. Atkinson, receiving it, was first thrown into consternation, and then seized with an ungovernable desire to drop everything and go to her, make her admit that she felt more than was in that letter. Nothing could so adroitly have furthered her cause with him as just those unresponsive lines.

Van Studdiford had done a wiser thing than he knew when he sent Henry Fürst West with his erratic cousin. Fürst came of German parentage, and had in him all the sober steadiness of that blood, and all the business ardor

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of his American technical training. Nothing in the world so interested him, so satisfied his very soul, as the plans for the new factory in Phœnix, and the details of its construction. Nothing could hope to rival these in his mind except, possibly, the equally engrossing idea of a similar project for Sacramento. Philip, at heart entirely uninterested in the whole thing, hating Phœnix, with its big-voiced men and badly-dressed women, his heart and brain filled with other thoughts, other plans, still dared not, in his companion's presence, let himself go as if he had been alone, terminate Charles' work in the shortest possible period, failing with it entirely if need be, and rush back to the spot where his own interests lay.

Atkinson, studying carefully his companion's character, searching eagerly for a single weak point in his armor, found none. Fürst was impregnable to Philip because he had not one trait, one thought, one sympathy in common with the erotic man, the charm of whose presence, however, even he dimly perceived. Thus it came about that Atkinson was forced into what was, to him, an entirely new plan of procedure. He laid renewed siege to Virginia by letter; and, in the difficulties and finesse of that pursuit, found welcome relief from the tedium of "business," by which he was surrounded. Writing—the writing of artistic letters—is an art in which few men, even professional authors, are, or can be, proficient. Hitherto Atkinson, incomparable with his tongue, had made it a rule of his career never to commit himself on paper. But at last there was a situation where he was too much in earnest to weigh possibilities in the balance. In the beginning

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he found himself clumsy with his pen, and determined, forthwith, to conquer that failing. At night, while Heinrich pored steadily over columns of figures and problems in strength of beam, balance and measurement, Philip launched his craft and set sail on the ocean of considered words. The occupation soon disclosed delights of its own. Here, at last, was something of the present in which a deep, vibrating interest might be taken. He saw his difficulty at once: how, lacking the old, dependable adjuncts of background, situation, look, tone, gesture, he must create, out of ink on paper, the mood that he was past master at bringing to life in the old way. Between the first of April and the last of June he produced—and mailed—a series of letters that fully accomplished his purpose. Gradually, little by little, Virginia's replies took on his tone. Little by little, like a moonflower at dusk, she opened to him, till he became almost reconciled to the delays that kept him in the unromantic West.

Virginia, however, was scarcely so contented with the continued absence. More than once, by an ill-considered slip, Philip's letters betrayed something that the man himself could have kept from her had they been together: the fact of his supreme selfishness: that what he was doing was for his own vanity's sake, rather than for her, unselfishly. Three or four times an ill-turned phrase exposed some underlying motive; and she caught a glimpse of the soul of the man—oh, warped, shrunken, imprisoned soul, so well concealed!—and by the shock was driven to silence, till a perfect letter drew her back into the old faith, the real love, that were hers. And also, now and

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then, when the new art lessened a little, he showed her a genuine desire, a wish to come back, a longing to see her, hear her voice, which often engulfed him and all his unconscious sophistry. For, even at this time, so far as it lay in him really to love, Philip Atkinson loved his cousin's wife: not deeply enough to break her bonds and take her away forever; nor bravely enough to renounce her absolutely; but more entirely and more unselfishly than he had ever loved any of the thousand and one women of his career; and so recklessly that he was never to love a woman after her.

In the middle of April Mr. and Mrs. Merrill returned to Chicago from their long, useless wanderings; and, since their house was occupied, they took an apartment in the Metropole till summer should drive them East again. Virginia, to her great joy, gained permission from Charles, who had kept her close with him at Grangeford, to go to her Mother for a fortnight. The two weeks were not, however, wholly joyful. Virginia beheld her Father a pathetic mental wreck: saw her Mother startlingly aged. And, on her own side, Mrs. Merrill found that she scarcely knew her daughter. Through grief, through loneliness, through another unguessed cause, the pretty, delicate child had grown into a woman whom the Mother, a little blinded by love and by solicitude, could not fathom.

Nevertheless, the days in town fled far more rapidly than those in sleepy Grangeford. There were many meetings with old friends. There were theatres, dressmakers, shops. And Virginia saw her Mother's face grow young again in the momentary release from care. Her visit,

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moreover, was lengthened, little by little, till, by the time she returned into her empty idleness, it was mid-May.

Grangeford in May and June was, perhaps, at its best. The keen vitality of the newly-revived year had been worn away by no oppressive heat. Society was inspired by fresh white gowns and shady hats to teas and tennis-parties, even picnics and a dance or two at the new golf club, across the river. And Virginia entered into these frivolities with all her grace: rejoicing in every hour that could be urged into a little faster flight, falling asleep each night in the knowledge that she had been brought one day nearer to Philip.

It was with this thought of him whose absence had taught her love, that Virginia's mind was constantly occupied. She gave little thought, no understanding, to the man so close to her, who loved her lawfully. And yet, during those weeks that followed her return home, her husband did much which deserved, at least, some notice. If one could have analyzed him closely, Van Studdiford's two years of married life would probably be shown to have changed him almost as much as his wife. In the beginning, he had been infatuated with the little girl he had married, and took her quiescence for shy affection. The months before the coming of the baby brought a disillusionment so thorough that afterward, when his wife was normal again, Charles was glad to try to excuse everything on the ground of mental disturbance. The summer before, though he had now and then stolen a week-day hour or a Saturday afternoon from the factory, he had been wrapped in work which only he could do;

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and his recreation had been found in the performances of his two-year-olds, which he had this year entered at the Harlem and Washington Park tracks. The startling accident of November, which had thrown his wife back into such an apathy of grief, brought him rather disappointment than sorrow; and, during the winter months, he had made only a few easily discouraged attempts to waken Virginia's interest in himself. But now, at last, he determined to learn the attitude of this woman who, from the very first, had concealed her thoughts from him so sedulously. The real reason of that concealment, her almost disgust with his personality, never, for a moment, entered his mind.

For six weeks then, during the latter half of May and the whole of June, Charles played the lover to his wife: awkwardly, for he was never a woman's man, sincerely, but—unsuccessfully. To her astonishment he now made a point of going to all the informal entertainments that her continued mourning allowed. One or two days in the week he remained at home after luncheon, to take her driving in his sulky, or the lightest runabout: amusements that she dreaded, and avoided when she could. More than once he even proposed their going into Chicago on a Saturday, doing a theatre, staying overnight at the Annex, and returning on the Sunday morning train. This, after much urging on his part, was tried once. But Virginia was not greatly amused, and Van Studdiford found himself suddenly longing for some of his old haunts and companions. The experiment was not repeated.

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After several weeks of this effort, without having been able to perceive that he was making the slightest impression on his wife, Charles began to relax. He was tired of his exertions; but he had seen nothing to rouse a qualm of jealousy. He never caught a glimpse of the outside of one of Atkinson's letters. His conclusion was, simply, that Virginia had no emotional nature; and, with a mental shrug, he turned to his work again—after one Saturday night, alone, in Chicago—"on business."

By some evil coincidence, Charles' attentions to Virginia ceased just at the moment when a letter, dated June 26, mailed from Sacramento, brought Mrs. Van Studiford word that while she read it the writer would be on his way Eastward, to her. Philip, his work accomplished, had left San Francisco, by the Northwestern Limited, on the twenty-ninth of June. It was the year before the institution of the 72-hour trains; but good luck should carry him into Chicago on the afternoon of Sunday, July third; and, in any case, he would reach Grangeford by Monday. It was thus that Virginia calculated. There was, of course, a possibility that Philip could get to Grangeford by Sunday evening; but on this idea she would not allow herself to build. No. On Monday she should see him, and then—let the whole world around her perish. Her need of it was gone.

From the moment of her receipt of that letter, on Thursday, it would be hard to say whether Virginia was happiest or most miserable. Never had the hours crawled so slowly. Never had the future taken on so exquisite a rose-tint. She was twenty years old; and she was in

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love for the first time in her life. She was not old enough, she was not thoughtful enough, to question her mental state, to understand the wrong of it and the necessity for its banishment. What wonder that Lucy Markle stared in admiration at the sudden change in her face, the brilliance of her coloring, the dazzling light in her eyes, the readiness of her hysterical laughter? Or what wonder that the maid also stood aghast at her mistress' caprices, her sudden fits of unaccountable ill-temper, her impatience, and her sudden repentances?

Nevertheless, the three days passed—Thursday, Friday and Saturday. On Sunday morning Virginia suddenly realized that she did expect Philip that night: that if he did not come she should be in utter despair. The morning rose, hot and golden. At the breakfast table Charles unexpectedly announced that he should leave early in the afternoon for his horse farm, which lay twelve miles south of Grangeford; and he failed to suggest his wife's accompanying him. Virginia's heart leaped within her. He would be gone all afternoon: far into the evening! She might—receive Philip—alone! But Charles' next words caused her face to flame and her heart to sink, unaccountably:

"By the way, it's just possible that Atkinson may turn up this afternoon. He wired me on Thursday that he was leaving 'Frisco. Put him up as usual, of course, if he gets here. To-morrow's a holiday, and I can go over his report with him then.—I've kept Fürst out there to see operations through."

Virginia made some sort of reply, she scarcely knew

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what. The rest of the meal was silent. She sat crumbling her bread, and trying to reason herself out of caring because Philip had telegraphed Charles and not her. Moreover, she was angry, ridiculously angry, that the stout, red-faced man opposite her, should be in a state of such supreme indifference to that for which she had been living for many weeks.

The day increased in heat ; and Virginia, whose nerves were in a precarious condition, went to her room immediately after dinner, with an unpretended headache. At three o'clock the sound of wheels told her that Charles had left the house ; and she sighed, deeply, with relief. A little later Marion Hunt telephoned to invite her to tea. But Lucy answered at once that Mrs. Van Studdiford was in bed with a sick headache, and could see no one, much less go out ; for Lucy was perfectly aware of what the evening promised. Virginia had lain wide awake, on her couch, for an hour or more. But towards four o'clock she dozed, started up, and then went soundly to sleep, not waking till six, when Lucy appeared with a little supper-tray.

On learning the time, Virginia roused herself. Philip might have come by the five o'clock train. It was the one by which she had instinctively expected him. There was now but one more by which he could reach Grangeford to-night : the one arriving at 7.10. After much thought and hesitation, she sent an order to the stables to have this train met. She would not go herself. Then she drank half a cup of tea, and bade Lucy dress her.

It was a quarter past seven when Virginia wandered

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out into the orchard that ran down to the river at the back of the place. The train was in : she had heard its whistle.—But Philip, of course, had not come. It was absurd to suppose that he had.—Slowly, her white gown trailing about her on the smooth turf, she passed back and forth, in the pretty half-light, the evening wind bathing her hot temples with gentle coolness. Now she heard a horse's step on the gravel.—The groom was returning—alone? Stopping quite still, one hand upon a knot of the old tree-trunk beside her, she paused, her heart beating violently. Ah! The runabout was entering the stable! He had not come! He had not come!—And yet, it had stopped at the house first.—How should he know where she awaited him?—Trembling in every limb, she turned and began to walk again toward the river, stepping noiselessly that she might hear the least sound behind her. When she was on the edge of the steep little bank, she could no longer keep her face from the direction in which he might come. Turning again, her heart gave one great leap, and was still.

Philip was there, among the trees, walking rapidly toward her. She saw his face, his bare head, his hair slightly ruffled ; for he had paused for no toilet. She saw his smile. Then, with a low exclamation, she ran to him, would have flung herself into his arms. But he stopped this, only taking her two hands into his and smiling tenderly : searching her face, her soul, with his all-penetrating eyes, till, as of old, she felt her heart bared to him, and trembled with the delight of it. It was all Philip! All the old Philip! What other man in the world could have

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met such a situation and not used it up within the first five minutes?

Truly, none but he. And, alas, that it was so! The situation was not used up for many hours. But by that time much else had been begun.

## CHAPTER VIII

THE week following the return of Atkinson, the end of the first week of July and the beginning of the second, would, to an onlooker knowing all the facts, have been the decisive period, the turning-point, in the history of Virginia's life. But to Virginia it passed in a mist. To Atkinson it was the expected reward for his recent literary efforts—and something more. In fine, it was the crude result of a bartered marriage. But, through it, the one chiefly concerned neither discovered nor suspected anything. He was very busy at this time, was Van Studdiford, with reports and estimates and plans relating to Phœnix and Sacramento. His wife was accustomed to take care of herself. Philip was at the factory every day. He, Charles, sat up very late o' nights in his library, at work. But this was not to be asked of a mere salaried man; and it did not occur to him to inquire into his cousin's evenings. When he had finished his considerations for the night, Charles was wont to go upstairs to his own room, glad of his bed and of speedy sleep.

To Virginia and Philip the evenings were long idyls, spent always together, beside the river, or in the bit of woodland south of the Van Studdiford place. Here Virginia took subtle lessons, and proved herself a pupil all too apt. Atkinson was now constantly discovering fresh

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delights in her. And the exceeding danger of the later hours only added a last zest to this situation of situations.

Lucy was become their whole dependence now; for into Lucy's room the back staircase all but entered. Then there was but the boudoir to be traversed till he reached her room, the destination. This route, passed the first time for farewell, was become too well-trodden now. It was almost more than they could have hoped for, that Lucy should have been what she was: that, through everything, not one word against her mistress ever escaped her lips, even below stairs. Justice found in her an unwilling pawn; and, in the end, was obliged to cast her aside as useless for his iron purpose. At this period, as always, the maid, anxious, frightened though she was by day as well as by night, did all that she was told, left necessary doors ajar, and, after Philip's first passage, inward, even tried to sleep. But usually her heart was in too great a tumult. For had she not taken color from her lady, and laid away, in a precarious place, one of those long-dead meteor roses marking the first pain of the tragedy of Virginia?

One morning of the second week after his return, dawn, creeping stealthily in at Atkinson's windows on the floor above Virginia's rooms, failed to surprise him. The room was empty: the bed unpressed by any form. At a few minutes past four, however, came softest steps along the hall. The door opened noiselessly, and Philip slipped in. He made no move toward the bed. Pushing a Morris chair to the open south window, he took his pipe from the bureau, filled and lighted it, and then,

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settling back luxuriously and crossing his feet before him, mingled the fragrance of his tobacco with the incense of the dawn.

The morning, all rose-and-gold, tinged with the freshness of dark hours, still promised heat. The ensuing day would be breathless. But as yet the light advanced only by exquisite, reluctant stages. Atkinson, heedful of any beauty, stared out, meditatively, at the expanse of green tree-tops before him, saw the great pageant spread out in the eastern sky, heard the bird-voices in their long crescendo from earliest twitter to full-throated fortissimo, and let them tinge his mood.

And yet Philip was scarcely looking or listening. He was in communion with himself: was making a determined effort to learn his situation. Events of the past week had moved so rapidly that he had had little time to consider the taking of any single step. Now, after a wonderful night, in the coolness of passion, he tried to think.

Never before had his situation been so difficult; never had he had so little reason to be satisfied with himself. He was doing a dastardly thing; and yet the affair in its fulness had hardly been premeditated. Long ago, when he had been quite unaware of her ignorance of love or the methods of flirtation, he had played with and upon Virginia. By degrees, against his own judgment, he had been led, by all but irresistible impulse, into regrettable lengths. More and more, as he advanced, did he become amazed at the purity of Virginia's mind, the singleness of her purpose. Before these things he, whose weapons against

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experience were innumerable, had found himself defenceless. He had scarcely hitherto perceived how far his letters had committed him, so bent had he been upon forcing her emotional side. He realized, too, this morning, that, even after his return, he might have avoided what he had done. Mistake after mistake rose from the immediate past and confronted him. Had he actually lost all of his old-time cunning, prudence, foresight? Surely not! Surely there was a reason for this behavior!

The question asked, was suddenly answered. As Atkinson puffed, reflectively, at his pipe, his eyes grew soft. There was rising before him a vision: something that he had brought to the perception of many women: something that he himself had never thought to see. He had been trying to consider this affair in the old, calculating way; but he knew now that this was impossible. He had pitted himself once too often against his mighty opponent. Passion might be played with, long and safely. Love, might not. And to Atkinson, all undeserving, had been given the greatest thing: that which all pretend to, that of which scarce one person in ten thousand really knows a single detail. The love-stories of the ages are not many! Paris and Helen, Launcelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Iseult, Abelard and Heloise, Paolo and Francesca, Dante and Beatrice, Sophie of Celle and Von Königsmarck (how familiar are they all!), just these, in history; and none knows why they are handed down, from generation to generation, not as stories of crime and disgrace, but as heroic tragedies, fit subjects for the epics woven about them all.

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

Of these Philip was not thinking, in this July dawn. But he was trying to grapple with the great element that inspired them all, trying to pierce the glittering mists that hid both reason and judgment from him: trying hard to understand what inevitable result the future must bring, and, in that future, what his attitude should be. But all these things were still withheld. How could he determine that, after reasoning with himself, he must reason with the woman, must show her the swift-approaching consequences of their present life? Reason with Virginia! Move cold-bloodedly from cause to effect with the woman he was ready to deliver up his soul for? Poison her mind, in the least degree, with the degrading philosophy of discretion and calculated deceit? Philip recoiled at the thought. He had led her, perhaps, into wickedness; even—into crime. But the facts and their weight he preferred to make his own consideration. He could not allow her to know his anxiety. He loved her; and love had, in a day, accomplished what years had not taught. His supreme quality, his selfishness, was brought home to him at last.

Having come to no conclusion, having failed, absolutely, to find any solution for his problem, Atkinson finally left his place, put away his pipe, threw off his robe, and, as the first hot sunbeam shot into the room, flung himself wearily into bed. Nor was anyone surprised when, six hours later, he walked into the breakfast-room half an hour after Van Studdiford had finished. Master Philip had done that sort of thing all his life.

The midsummer days moved on, still dream-wise, for

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the two. Virginia, seemingly untroubled by any scruple or remorse, ran the gamut of happiness, from languorous content to wildest heights of surrender. Philip adored her. Lucy watched over her, anxiously, devotedly. Van Studdiford was good-natured, but always at work. What more could she desire? She forgot Grangeford. She forgot Marion—poor Marion, filled now with mingled bitterness and yearning. She forgot even her Mother, who was far out of reach, on the Atlantic coast, with her wearisome charge.

Five radiant weeks, thirty-five unclouded days, were given Virginia before there crept across her heart the first, unheralded shadow. It was in the early half of August, by Van Studdiford's unconscious arrangement, that the unpleasant day came. For many months, nay, for a year past, Charles had desired to take his wife to see his horse-farm, his breeding-stables, which were the pride of his life. More than once, when every arrangement had been made, she had refused to go; for Virginia had never had much interest in horses, and, since her marriage, that little feeling had dwindled, because of Charles' enthusiasm about them. The excuses made when such a jaunt was tentatively suggested, had been legion; until at last, ashamed, in her own joy, to refuse Charles so little, she quite unexpectedly fell in with his mild wish that she drive out with him on this day—Saturday, the sixth of August. She supposed they were to go alone, and had resigned herself. — But, later in the week, Charles, remembering the old, suspected attachment between Philip and Marion Hunt, had an inspira-

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tion, asked them both, ordered Carson to put up an elaborate luncheon, got out the drag, and started them all, willy-nilly, at ten o'clock in the morning, he driving, Virginia beside him, the other two behind.

In the memories of three of the four, that drive lingered as one of the most unpleasant of their lives. The morning was hot and oppressive, the roads very dusty, the atmosphere leaden. Virginia, separated from Philip, restless in Marion's watchful presence, uneasy, as always, near Charles, was in her unhappiest mood. Marion, though she knew nothing, divined a good deal of the situation before she had had time to lean back in her seat. She had been for a long time growing more and more hurt over Philip's continued neglect. Moreover, she looked her very worst that day, and knew it. Her face was red and peeling from much hatless golf; her hair had refused to go up properly; and the pale blue of her hat and gown emphasized every defect. Moreover, she had never been wholly blind to the contrast presented between her and Virginia; and it had never been greater than to-day. Marion began the drive, then, in a freezingly sarcastic frame of mind; and little occurred during the following hour to change it. Philip, annoyed though he was by Charles' happy tactlessness, was still overwhelmingly polite to his companion, refused to take offence at any of her short answers, and might have succeeded in bringing her out of her mood had he not permitted his eyes to stray constantly, and with too readable looks, to the figure of Virginia in front of him. Everyone of these glances was intercepted by Marion, and everyone

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of them went through her like a knife. They formed the beginning of that which, afterwards, she could neither forget nor forgive. And yet, during the two-hour drive, Virginia never turned her head toward the back seat. She talked a little to Charles, and otherwise sat listening to the sound of Philip's voice flowing on, smoothly, in conversation with Marion. Every tone of it was a caress that stung.—Oh, most unlucky day!

It was exactly twelve o'clock when they reached the farm and found Thompson the trainer, his wife, two daughters, and the eight hands, grouped formally to receive them. Then, for one hour, three forlorn figures followed the delighted Charles round the great stables and the miniature track, examined the racers and the trotters, the carriage and saddle animals, admired the order and cleanliness everywhere prevailing, gave the expected praise, and at last, wearily relieved, returned to the house, where luncheon had been spread, coffee made, and the wines cooled.

That excellent meal well deserved the attention given it by the four. Little by little, as they ate, the stiffness between Virginia and Marion wore off. A little laughter was heard; and Charles, having proposed several toasts, was in the best of humors. None of them noticed Thompson, who stood in the doorway, anxiously surveying the sky. None of them in the least heeded the faint sounds of heat-thunder that growled, from time to time, while they ate. The East might lower if it would: the sun was still out, and the weather too unimportant for comment.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Luncheon over, Charles asked what time the drag should be got ready again, received no suggestion from the trio, and, because he was greatly enjoying his day, himself ordered it for four o'clock. At the mention of that hour, three hearts sank; but none of the three would express disappointment. And now Charles started off with the head groom to go through the records of "Carrier" and "Ananias," his trotters; and the other three wandered aimlessly out of doors, with a vague idea of killing the next two hours by an exploration of the farm.

The land under Thompson's management was by no means wholly devoted to horses. Charles owned a hundred and fifty acres of excellent soil on either side of the Grangeford-Hilton highway. Of this, not more than thirty acres were taken up by the stables, paddocks and track; five more were under Mrs. Thompson's supervision, in the way of chicken-runs, a dairy, and flower and vegetable gardens. One hundred acres were under cultivation; and the last fifteen, on the south side of the road, were left wooded and uncleared. Close to these woods, and bounded on the other side by one end of the great apple orchard, stood a tiny cottage in which, up to within six weeks, had lived Thompson's Mother, an ancient little old woman, vigorous to the last week of her life, and to the end intolerant of the care of the daughter-in-law with whom she would never live. Toward the end of June old Mrs. Thompson had died. She was buried at Hilton; but her cottage, with its quaint old furniture—the work of pioneer hands—remained exactly as it had stood during her long lifetime.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Through the orchard, across corn-fields, into pasture and bottom-lands, wandered, drearily enough, Philip, Virginia and Marion, until suddenly, at three o'clock, it became evident that they must seek speedy shelter from an imminent thunder-storm. They were half a mile of difficult walking from the house; and two of them were looking around a little anxiously, when Virginia, who had gone on ahead through the wood, spied the cottage, and, calling to the others, ran toward it. She reached the threshold some minutes before them; and, not dreaming of hesitation, turned the handle of the door, which opened slowly before her. At the same instant, straight across the dark sky, came a blue, hissing flash, followed by a crash and a roar that brought screams from Marion, approaching. Virginia had halted, suddenly. It seemed to her, for a moment, as if the flash had seared her heart. If it had been possible she would, then and there, have turned from that door and faced the storm in the open field.

Marion and Philip, however, were already beside her, and the man perceived the pallor of Virginia's face. Startled, for the instant, quite out of himself, he threw his arm around her.

"Were you so frightened, dear?" he began, in the low tone always used toward her.

But Virginia, feeling Marion's eyes in her back, quickly put him away, and tried to laugh. "The suddenness of the noise startled me," she said. "And I—I don't quite like to come in here alone."

"What a quaint place it is!" returned Marion, in a

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forced voice. But her eyes were fixed fast upon the other two.

The little rooms were all but dark ; for the storm had increased rapidly, and blue-black clouds hid the entire sky. Virginia sank down upon a chair beside the window, and, with her hand on the sill, looked out at the gushing sheets of rain. She was in the strangest state of mind. She felt no fear whatever of the storm, and yet her agitation increased, momentarily. The room with its stiff, still furniture, the faintly musty odor of a place unused, the breathlessness of the air within, the furious rushing of wind and water without, all these, or none of them, combined to raise within her a feeling of unutterable desolation, a sense of imprisonment, as overpowering as it was unreasonable. And all the time she was also under the dreamy spell of knowing this place intimately, of having lived there through innumerable lonely hours.

Philip, puzzled by her manner, afraid, because of Marion's presence, to betray his anxiety, stood nearby, gazing steadily into the neglected yard. Marion was further back, behind them both, watching both, all the bitterness in her heart expressed in her eyes, could either of the others have read them then.

They were obliged to remain in the room for half an hour before the gush of water ceased and the sky lightened. Then, regardless of the state of the paths and the road, they set out, hurriedly, for the farmhouse, to be met, halfway, by Thompson and Charles with rubbers, umbrellas, and an old mackintosh or two.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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The return drive was not wholly a pleasure even to Charles, who began at last to perceive that the day was not the thorough success he had believed it to be. And when, at a quarter to six, Marion was finally left at her own door, there was a general sigh of relief that the whole thing was over.

And yet—was it over? Was the unpleasant impression left by the day one that would also disappear with it; or was it more permanent? With Philip and Virginia all unpleasantness was, doubtless, fleeting. Alone with each other, what unhappy memory could remain? But with Marion Hunt this one day of the summer on which she had been with Atkinson, must necessarily be graven on her mind. A year ago, Marion had been as certain as all Grangeford was that Philip would marry her. Surely, surely, his manner could have meant nothing less! And, though he had now dropped her, absolutely, insultingly, without a word, without the suggestion of a reason, he had still done it so much in his own, incomparable way, had, involuntarily, left so perfect an impression of a man regrettably relinquishing all his hope of happiness for some unguessed but too valid reason, that she had never yet been quite able to abandon the belief that he must, in time, come back to her.

But after the day at the horse-farm Marion knew, at last, that he would never come back. Her eyes, sharpened by loneliness and waiting, told her what would have frightened Atkinson had he realized it. She did not make the jealous mistake of putting all the blame of her great loss upon Virginia. Atkinson had betrayed himself.

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far too thoroughly for that, at the door of the cottage. He was in love—for the moment—with Van Studdiford's wife. Thus Marion expressed it to herself. And in the embittered cruelty of that little sentence, all the affection she had felt for her former schoolmate died, forever.

There was not more intentional malice in Marion than in the average woman; but she had also a woman's other qualities. It was, therefore, in all probability by her that Rumor was unchained and let fly through Grangeford. Open gossip, conversing on street-corners about Virginia Merrill, there was none. Her name was very rarely mentioned. And yet—every wise Mother in the town believed she understood perfectly the state of affairs at the Van Studdiford house: believed, such is the way of woman, that she had divined it quite alone and unaided long since; and she sent the children to bed a quarter of an hour early that she might lay the affair before her husband, who first pooh-poohed, then grunted, and finally chewed the end of his cigar reflectively, wishing it did not seem so confounded womanish to get Sam Grundy's opinion on the subject.

In the next four months Virginia, had she looked for them, would have found many ominous signs in the faces of the townspeople. But Virginia did not now take any more thought of her neighbors than had been her custom since coming to Grangeford. She was given entirely to the consideration of her own doings. Living the time from September to Christmas, she believed herself happy. Looking back upon it, long, long afterward, she shuddered at the thought of her blindness. Philip!—Philip!—

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Philip!—Day by day, hour by hour, he was her thought. He lived still at the big house, and yet he was not with her so much as at first. That madness, indeed, was possible neither to human nature nor to natural surroundings. Philip was still her slave. There had been no question, in either of their minds, as to that. But—ah, there were now “buts”! First, it was imperative that he should lose no ground with Van Studdiford. Therefore he worked rather hard, rather faithfully. Moreover, Colonel Turner, of the first Illinois volunteers, a great friend of Philip’s, had been urging him, ever since his return from Cuba, to join the regiment; and now, suddenly, he was offered a second Lieutenant’s commission, and, because of a genuine interest in Cuba, accepted it, and went to Chicago every Friday evening to drill.

At this time, indeed, “Jingoism” was at its height in the middle West. It was scarcely possible for anyone to avoid either partisanship for or aversion to the Cuban cause. And Philip, who had in him the true adventurer’s blood, betook himself to his drill manual and tactic book with real eagerness. On his drill nights he stayed in the city, at the apartment of his sister, returning to Grangeford on the morning train. And although Virginia had no complaint to make to him, her heart was secretly very sore at what seemed the beginning of separation.

Moreover, Virginia had now a genuine fear to occupy her hours: the fear of war. It seemed almost imminent. And suppose Philip should be obliged to go! Suppose Philip should die there, in that wilderness, alone, without her! At least one night every week she now gave

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up to such terrors as these; and they were the harder to endure in that she refrained from mentioning them to Atkinson when he was with her. Perhaps, at this time, when the prospect of war was, after all, indefinite, had she pleaded well enough he would, for her sake, have thrown up his commission. For she was still almost all-powerful with him. But even she, in her own heart of hearts, could not make herself imagine what the thing that she so vividly dreaded would really be like: or even that it could actually come to pass. Therefore Time and her opportunity went by, and were lost.

The weeks had travelled far by this time. Summer was dead; and, with each day's approach to winter, the nods of womenfolk in Grangeford grew frostier to Virginia. The Misses Heminway actually bristled when she passed them. Little Mrs. Pattison's rosy, wrinkled face was filled with mild distress; but her gallant husband, mindful of a radiant, golden vision of the young Virginia, never lessened the sweep of his old-fashioned hat. And Madam Farnsworth, who was old enough, and well enough assured of her position to do as she pleased, called twice, that autumn, on Mrs. Van Studdiford; and, though she was neither time received, did no more than shake her head impatiently that Mrs. Merrill's daughter should have so little of her Mother's *savoir vivre*.

These, and many more characteristic disclosures on the part of the various Grangeford women, Virginia ignored, nay, laughed at, from Philip's arms. They meant nothing to her. These country people had never been more than tolerated; and just because she had cared so

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little for their goodwill, she knew well that they would be the more heartless toward her now. But she refused to see that their attitude toward her could ever seriously affect her happiness. Mrs. Merrill, indeed, had, long before, recognized their importance to her daughter's future; but she had been unable to bring Virginia to her point of view, and had left the matter to Time to care for. And in time, indeed, Virginia could acknowledge, with exceeding bitterness, the truth of her Mother's teachings. But then she was to work and toil and creep her penitential way back to favor, treasuring a nod from one of these "country folk" as she would not now have treasured a command to dine with royalty. But, alas! Time was to work great changes with Virginia.

Just now, there was but one person in Grangeford whose blindness was seriously necessary to her happiness and Philip's. And he was, certainly, the last to suspect the drama in his house. September, October, November passed away, and Charles never dreamed of what was enacted before him. And then, at last, in December, by no one's word, by no betrayal, no accident, no carelessness on the part of the twain, just through some slightest incident unremembered even by himself, Van Studdiford's attention was roused. He watched, and he saw nothing. He listened: all was silent. Yet Doubt had entered into his mind; and suddenly the future loomed black before Philip and the wife.

## CHAPTER IX

DURING the first three weeks of December there was one great, sympathetic subject of conversation at the plow factory, in which the foremen were in perfect agreement with the newest errand boys. This was the state of temper of "The Boss." Grangeford also remarked it. Business associates saw it, wondered, smiled and winked. Van Studdiford had won the reputation of being the keenest of business men, the most observing of masters, severe with anyone suspected of shirking, but universally just. Never, in the history of his business career, had he allowed temper and caprice to rule him as now. Philip perceived it early, but for a long time persistently avoided its recognition, not only before the factory men, but also before his own conscience. He did not speak of it to Virginia; and she, who made it her rule to observe as little as she could in regard to her husband, and who actually knew him less well than did her own maid, divined nothing unusual about him. There was but one person in the world from whom she would have taken enlightenment; and there did, finally, come a day when Philip felt obliged to open her eyes.

Since the beginning of the cold weather, Atkinson had fallen back into his old, comfortable habit of coming home

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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to tea at five o'clock ; and the dusk idyls of the year before were being repeated. Of all their time together, this hour, the hour of danger, of sentiment, of repression, was the most delicious. The tea-table was always placed near the piano ; and, for both of them, the memories of these scenes were fraught with bits of fragrant melody, long-drawn, pianissimo, from Chopin, from Schumann, from Gounod. And at these times Philip was in his subtlest mood, the mood of skilfully varied self-restraint, in which, after all, Virginia loved him best. Their talk, like the music, was fragmentary, and never concerned anything but themselves and their happiness. But there came an afternoon, that of the twentieth of December, when the discussion of the dusk-hour made a turning-point in their history. Now, for the first time, an alien element was introduced into all their intercourse, which was, henceforth, never to be absent from them : the element of dread.

Atkinson opened the subject. For a long time he had been silent : had sat dreamily watching Virginia, as she moved about the room, her tea-gown of pale mauve clinging close to the reluctantly developing figure. She was not a child, now. And in his eyes she was far more nearly perfect than on that long-past day when he had first met her, ten weeks before her marriage.

"Virginia," he said, softly, as if he only thought aloud: "Are we to give each other up?"

She turned, impetuously, and then stopped to stare at him. "You—you are not smiling," she said, at length.

His face grew more serious still. "I cannot smile.—I meant it."

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"Philip!" there was almost menace in her tone.

"I think you have been unobservant, lately."

"In what?"

"About—Charles."

"Charles!" she smiled, scornfully. "Why should I observe him?"

"Because he is observing you:—us."

"What do you mean?"

"His mood is marked, Virginia. At the factory all the men are either laughing or swearing at it.—I've never known him so downright unreasonable yet.—And then there have been incidents, lately.—I'm obliged to watch, dear. One of us must."

For another moment she stood still, absently fingering the petals of one of his never-failing roses. Then, all at once, she dropped it, and ran to him, kneeling at his side, laying her two hands on his knee. "You will see me to-night?" she asked. "You are surely coming to-night?"

"Consider, Virginia," he murmured, under his breath. "Consider the risk. Consider the—possible—scandal—"

Her delicate hands tightened. "You will come?" she repeated.

For a second still he hesitated. Then, bowing his head, he answered: "Yes."

And perhaps, after all, they were right. Which of the gods loved discretion?

Four more days passed; and now Virginia also was brought to notice Charles' state of mind. Then there

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came a little incident which, though it had no bearing on their danger, served mightily to trouble Philip. Van Studdiford, dilatory, like all men, in whatever had to do with shopping, decided that he would go to Chicago, to get the last of his Christmas gifts, on the twenty-second of the month. He was to be gone only for the day; but he insisted on Virginia's accompanying him, which she did with outward grace and distressful reluctance in her heart. But he was very gentle with her all day, and did his best to keep her amused and occupied. Nor would she speak, afterwards, of the happenings of that journey. And Atkinson was obliged to hide his uneasiness as he could when, at four o'clock the next morning, he was admitted to her by Lucy, and found his lady-love kneeling at her window, weeping, wearily. He tried to talk to her, but she was not in the mood for talking. A sudden passion of depression, or sorrow, or remorse had overswept her, and, try as she would, she could not shake it off.

Breakfast, on Christmas morning, was, as on all holidays, served at ten o'clock. Philip and Charles were both in their places before Virginia, white, worn, making only the faintest effort at a smile, came in, carrying her gifts. When she was seated there was a general opening of packages and some attempt at Christmas gayety, which died away as it had come, leaving a sense of relief that the effort was over. The gifts, beautiful, expensive, little thought-of after the first, perfunctory thanks, were pushed aside; and the meal began. Virginia played at eating, for her heart was heavy within her, and to-day she had little thought even for Atkinson. Perhaps Charles, had

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he not been so blind, could, this single time, have comforted her better. For, after all, Christmas is the children's day; and all night long Virginia's thoughts had been with her baby, picturing her as she would have been by now; imagining what this holiday might have meant; living heart-broken hours in the pretty, joyous little world that had been so cruelly lost to her.

Breakfast over, she made hurried excuses and fled to her room. Charles, who had glowered steadily through the meal, suddenly took it into his head that, had there been a prospect of his leaving the house, Virginia would have stayed downstairs. Without a word to his cousin he strode off to the library, banged the door after him, and threw himself into a chair before a desk covered with orderly piles of papers. Philip, thus left to himself on the day of days—which was also Sunday, knowing Virginia far too well to imagine that she wanted him, lounged off to the smoking-room with a book, and tried to forget the discomfort of his surroundings. It was of no use. For an hour or two he made a vain effort to become interested in printed characters. Then he flung the novel aside, smoked three pipes of over-strong tobacco, put his pipe away, decided that work was better than idleness, and, with the best intention in the world, walked into the library where Charles still sat, saying, agreeably, as he entered:

“Come, Charles! Let me help you with some of the California bids.”

Van Studdiford looked up, slowly; and Philip suddenly perceived that his eyes had never been so cold, so

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pale, so hard. "I've always wondered when it was you really wanted to work. Christmas and Sunday! The combination arrives every seven years. I congratulate you!"

Philip stared at his cousin. The moment was uncomfortable; but he would not quarrel with Charles. "I'm sorry you have that opinion of me," he responded, in a low voice. "I thought I had been doing a good deal of work this fall."

Van Studdiford snarled. "Oh—you have. You've done a damned sight more than anyone asked you to. You've muddled the Phœnix matter so that it'll take Fürst six months to get that land.—Work!—Bah!"

Never before in his life had Charles spoken so to any man in his employ. Though he had, before this, discharged Philip, it had been done quietly and courteously, almost with friendly depreciation. But at this last speech Philip's blood rose. His eyes grew brilliant. Furious words were on his lips. And then, suddenly, he remembered Virginia. Ah! Charles had a right to insult him; but, for her sake, he must take the insult. He would simply leave Van Studdiford till this mood was past.

"I'm sorry that what I have found in regard to the title has displeased you, Charles," he uttered, stiffly. Then he turned toward the door.

Van Studdiford let him take three or four steps. One watching him very closely would have perceived that he wished, of all things, just to be rid of Philip's presence. Nevertheless, nerving himself to the point long before the other had reached the door, he said, in his ugliest tone:

"Come back here!"

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Philip hesitated. Then he faced about, squarely, and stood still.

"Come back to this desk."

"Stop it, Charles!"

Van Studdiford rose. "You damned cad! How much more are you willing to take from me?"

Philip's face went deathly white. His fingers worked. "Not one more foul word," he answered. "When do you intend me to leave?"

Charles sank back into his chair. "When—you choose," he growled, striving to hide the relief in his voice.

"To-morrow morning, then, by the first train!" And Atkinson turned on his heel and left the room.

For ten minutes Charles Van Studdiford sat before his desk, motionless, rigid, staring off into space. His face was very pale, and this gave him a startlingly unusual appearance. But his expression was not that of an angry man. He was trembling, slightly, in the knees. His mind was almost a blank. After a time he tried to work again; but the effort was vain. What he had most wanted to do that day was done. Leaving his desk, he crossed the room and flung himself, wearily, upon his couch. There, though he could not sleep, he lay, motionless, lost in dreary thoughts, till Carson came to announce dinner: the Christmas dinner.

That meal was doubtless the most uncomfortable that either of the two men had ever endured. Virginia came in late, her eyes rather red, and sat dejected, neither speaking nor eating. Van Studdiford, watching her, had made

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up his mind that Atkinson had seen her already, when she said, petulantly :

" What in the world is the matter with you two? You look as if—you were sitting on pins."

Atkinson smiled, faintly. Charles laughed outright, more from nervousness than at the remark. " Holidays don't agree with me," he said, in a voice that was half a tone off its usual key.

Virginia shrugged her shoulders. It mattered very little to her how Charles felt, on this or any other day. But, during the meal, her eyes rested often, questioningly, on Atkinson. Her own secret and sacred grief, in which she had spent the morning, began to melt away before a nearer dread that had its foundation in Philip's eyes. Long before the end of that unhappy meal she had divined something of the situation between the men. Yet her heart refused the evidence discovered by her eyes and approved by her brain. It was not possible that anything definite had come. Philip would explain it soon. Philip *must* explain.

Opportunity for that explanation speedily arrived. Before the coffee was served, Charles had ordered Meteor and the sulky to be ready by the time the meal was over; and, at that order, the eyes of the other two met. When they rose from the table, at a quarter past three, Charles at once donned his fur-lined coat and heavy gloves, and, three minutes later, was speeding down the road, away from Grangeford, away from jealousy, anger, or care.

Meantime, Virginia and Philip stood in the drawing-room, face to face. For the moment, they only stared

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into each other's eyes. Then he took her, gently, into his arms, and drew her to a sofa which stood on the other side of the room, a little back from the windows. For a time, neither spoke. Then, still shutting away her persisting dread, Virginia said, faintly:

"Charles—is in a very bad mood—to-day."

Atkinson did not answer.

"Has he—been very angry with you?"

"Yes," returned Philip, dully: falling almost unconsciously into the tender tone that was used to bar all unhappiness from her.

"Why is he so angry with you?" Her lips were at his ear. There was relief in her tone. In his arms what could she dread?

Atkinson's heart was pierced as by a dagger. He would have given what remained of his honor to be able to answer her lightly. But she must know. And it would be a little easier for her to hear it from him.

"I am not quite sure why he is angry with me.—He says that he is not satisfied with my work."

She smiled. "Oh—he will be over that when he comes home.—Driving always cures him of a temper."

Atkinson's arms tightened around her, convulsively. "Virginia—Virginia—he has discharged me! I must leave here, to-morrow morning."

She neither moved nor spoke. In spite of her self-deception, she was scarcely surprised. At dinner, instinct had insisted to her that everything was very wrong. But—it was not possible to grasp the thought that Philip was going—was to leave her here, alone. This was the

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thing she could not understand: would not, dared not, understand.

Atkinson was murmuring something into her ear. But, for the first time in her life, she did not heed him. All at once she struggled from his arms to her feet. Seeing the look in her face, he started.

" You are going away?—You are going away from me?—To leave me here alone?—Oh, my God!"

He sprang up and caught her, just in time.

. . . . .

Afternoon sank swiftly into twilight, twilight into night: the merciful, velvet night, when lovers meet for last farewells. It was five in the morning when Atkinson crept back through Lucy's quiet room and up the stairs, to dress and finish packing. And meantime, while he pondered upon the day to come; Virginia was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, of transition. In that sleep the long love-dream was coming to its end. And with the daylight living reality, living loneliness, must begin.

As once before, nine months ago, she woke to the sense of utter emptiness. But the feeling of to-day was infinitely different from that that had been. Then she had stood, innocent and ignorant, in a halo of romance, of impending love. Now—there were only memories. Upon Philip's departure to-day she felt none of the aggravation of half-love, none of the out-reaching, none of the disappointed helplessness that she had known hitherto. After the shock of the afternoon, the bewilderment and foreboding of the night, her mood suddenly changed. She woke very late in the morning, drank her coffee, dressed

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carefully, and then seated herself in the jut of the South window of her room, to think.

There was much to be considered. Philip was gone: but only to Chicago. Surely, somehow, somewhere, very, very soon, they could meet. Meantime, there was Charles, who had never before seemed so important as to-day. During the night, in their long talk, she had had, from Philip, the brief tale of the quarrel; and it had been too apparent to both of them that the objection to Philip's work had been made merely to cloak another motive for getting rid of him. But now, now that she was alone, face to face with, wholly dependent upon, herself, every power of Virginia's mind was brought up before the single, terrible question: "Does he know?"

Did Charles know? How much—how little was it possible for him to have surmised? Again, could it be that he only suspected? Long and drearily did Virginia ponder the subject; long and wearily did she analyze her husband's behavior, his most trivial words, looks, and gestures. Think as she would, weigh, deduce, philosophize, she was left where she had begun. She could come to no conclusion.

After nearly two hours of fruitless puzzling, she turned at last to another subject, about which there could be little doubt, but which was by no means pleasant to contemplate: the attitude of Grangeford toward her. To this she was by no means blind. Up to this hour, she had merely been indifferent. But now!—without Philip, who, since his return from the West, she had considered the fixed stay of her life, what was she to do in this town? What occu-

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pation, what companionship, was there here for her? Ah! Were not all faces averted from her when she went abroad? Who came to call nowadays? What had she done with her first, perfect opportunity of reigning as queen in this "village"? Was she to allow these country folk to hurt her? Never! Better to lead a hermit's life than expose herself to the malice of this over-proper place. And, as she framed this thought, Virginia's face, already so much changed, became hard, cold, and bad to look upon.

At one o'clock she went downstairs, to lunch alone with Charles, hugging to her heart her new rôle of absolute impenetrability. But for all her thoughts, for all the unhappiness, wrong, nay, sin, of her married life, Virginia Merrill was not in any way of the type she was attempting to imitate. Philip had gained her love through his exceeding polish, his refinement, his skillful playing on the most sensitive chords of her nature. He had been her refuge, first from grief and loneliness, later from the unrefinement, the all but coarseness, of another man: her husband. And now, in her sudden woeful solitude, she found that she had but little strength. That first luncheon was a nightmare to her. And, in the end, just one week of the empty, dreary house broke her, completely. In her sudden tumult of realization, confusion, and misery, she did the thing that she should have avoided doing till the last: she went to see Marion Hunt.

Had Virginia ever been schooled to human nature, had she ever before come in contact with the big world of which Grangeford was unquestionably a part, she

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would have known well that, of all uncharitableness in the world, there is none so great as that of a young, disappointed woman, who believes herself deliberately wronged in the matter of a love-affair. Virginia neither knew nor surmised this. Marion had been her friend. Marion would sympathize. Marion she could trust. Therefore to Marion she went.

It was the day after the New Year of 1898:—a chilly, drizzling day, with now and then a faint gleam of watery sunshine breaking through grudging clouds. As she drove through the empty streets Virginia's heart beat high with a measure of false hope. They were nearing the Hunt house when she had a fleeting glimpse of Marion's head at an upper window. Ah! She was at home, then! Something, at least, would be settled between them. Of that something, Virginia could see only the brighter side. Having asked for Marion at the door, she was at once shown into the parlor, and she waited, rather nervously, for three or four minutes, considering what her first speech had better be. Presently the maid returned, alone, astonishment in her face, confusion in her manner, stammering, awkwardly:

“ M-Miss Hunt is not at home! ”

“ She is out! ” The visitor started to her feet.

“ Yes, Ma'am.”

“ Why—why—Oh! ” Virginia, her face scarlet, turned hastily to the door.

One moment, and she was back in the phaeton. Meteor was carrying her homeward as swiftly as his slender legs could move. She noticed nothing, however, of the

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length of the drive. The poison was working in her heart. She was repeating to herself, over and over again: "Miss Hunt is not at home!" And it seemed as if all the world had crumbled before her in that one, formal lie.

For three days more Virginia existed, alone, in the light of the new revelation. And that which she endured in the three days, is not to be considered lightly. She discovered herself to have a million new capacities for suffering. There was no hardness about her now: scarcely even pride. Marion had hurt more cruelly than Marion herself had dreamed possible; and this was much indeed. For now poor Virginia was deciding anew how all Grangeford felt toward her, undreaming that there were some, a dozen or more sensible women, in whose hands conventional cruelty was an unknown weapon, who would have received her, advised her, and shown her, perhaps, the way back to Charles and to absolution. But she persisted in her own method; and, in her bewilderment, committed another folly. She wrote Marion a note, infinitely pathetic did one see it so, asking for an interview, however brief, anywhere that Marion wished.

This appeal was not answered for two days; and meantime Virginia went through tortures of expectation. So absorbed was she in her own melancholy, that two of Philip's notes, sent under cover of Lucy, lay unanswered in her desk. Alas! What was Philip in comparison with such disgrace? After all, she was hardly a good transgressor, was Virginia.

On the afternoon of Monday, January the ninth, Mrs.

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Van Studdiford was in the drawing-room, at the piano, when the door was unexpectedly thrown open, and Carson announced, loudly :

“ Miss Hunt ! ”

Virginia had been playing from memory, and the end of the room, where she sat, was in shadow. She remained perfectly still, watching Marion walk, with exaggerated ease, across the room and seat herself upon the sofa. Then, moved by a quick impulse, Virginia turned to the wall, pressed a button, and threw a brilliant flood of light upon the scene.

“ Marion ! ” she cried, joyously, hurrying forward : “ Marion ! I was sure you would come ! ”

But there was no responsive light in Marion’s eyes. She sat up stiffly, unsmiling, her mouth screwed into its primmest lines. “ You wrote that you wished to see me,” she observed, staring straight before her.

Virginia recoiled, quivering. It took her two minutes to recover herself. Then she sat down, quietly, in a deep chair, at some distance from the sofa. There followed a silence that lasted for two or three highly uncomfortable minutes. Marion would not speak. Virginia, repulsed, thrown back upon herself, was trying, confusedly, to think how far she might go, what plan of behavior she had best adopt. She could feel Marion’s hard, accusing eyes fixed on her heart ; and, in the light of that look, began to read her friend for the first time truly. It was her first real battle against enmity : that enmity that she was to know so infinitely well ! And now, at the very outset, she was terror-stricken.

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Suddenly, with a little, preliminary gasp, she began : “ Why wouldn’t you see me the other day, Marion ? ”

“ I was very sorry not to have been at home.”

“ But you were at home. I saw you.”

Marion merely stared, in scornful silence.

“ Why wouldn’t you see me ? ” persisted Virginia.

At this absurd repetition, even Marion found herself slightly confused. After a second’s consideration she turned full on Virginia, and, as she spoke, her eyes carried the accusation home. “ I shouldn’t think you would care to ask why I didn’t wish to see you. I should think you would know very well why—no nice woman would wish to see you ! ”

Virginia went white to the lips. But, suddenly, a little of her Mother’s manner descended upon her. Her dignity had become perfect as she said, calmly : “ I am afraid, nevertheless, that I do *not* know. Please explain yourself.”

Marion’s eyes were venomous now. “ Oh, if you don’t know, *I sha’n’t* take the trouble to tell you ! ” And at this speech even Virginia perceived that Marion had become rather vulgar.

“ You must tell me, Marion.—Oh—what *is* the matter with you ? ” And the high manner fell away again, piteously.

Now for many, many months Marion Hunt, in the bitterness of unreturned love, had been cherishing an almost hatred, born entirely of jealousy, against her whilom friend. Therefore, at this juncture, tempted quite beyond herself, she gave Virginia the desired explanation. Rising

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from her seat, her angry eyes fixed unwinkingly on Virginia's pale face, her voice ringing high with false tones, she made that accusation which, for many years, lay between the two women, an impassable barrier to the semblance of friendliness, even acquaintanceship:

"I'll tell you, Virginia Merrill, why I don't want to see you in my house, and why I'll never again come inside of yours. It's because you're not fit for good women to speak to. You came here, with your money and your snobbery, and set yourself above us all; and people ran to you and toadied to you, and catered to your whims. You had everything you wanted, and so you began to want what belonged to other people. Philip Atkinson wasn't yours. But he lived in the house with you. And you—you made him stay beside you, and flirt with you, because you saw he cared for me. And when he went West to get away from you, you forced him to come back. And everybody in Grangeford knows what you are, and what he is to you. There isn't a woman in Grangeford that you are fit to associate with. They wouldn't let you look at one of their children. And I shall never speak to you again because you are a bad woman: because you are Phil——"

"Marion!"

The other stopped; but her eyes and her cheeks were afame.

Virginia pointed, with a shaking hand, to the door.  
"Go!" she said.

And Marion went. But, as she crossed that oft-trod-

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den threshold for the last time, all the anger was gone from her. Her gathered rage had spent itself. Already there was a new feeling knocking for entrance at her heart. Already the tears were swelling behind her hot eyes. But all this, Virginia, desperate and broken, could not know.

Two hours later, when Van Studdiford came home, he found his wife still seated in that chair, in the brilliantly-lighted drawing-room. It occurred to him that she had been taken ill. Certainly she looked very badly. He took off his hat and coat in the hall, and then went in again, and surveyed her, helplessly, as men do.

"Can I get you something?" he ventured.

"No, thank you. I am quite comfortable," was the faint reply.

"Perhaps I'd better send for Lucy?"

"No, don't, Charles. Sit down for a moment. There's something I'd like to ask of you."

He threw himself, rather wearily, upon the sofa, and waited, in silence, for her to speak. For a moment or two she watched him, dully, picturing Marion in his place. Then she began, in a low, unsteady voice:

"I—I think, Charles, that I haven't been quite well, lately. I'm very lonely, too, with—you away all day. My Mother and Father are in Chicago just now, you know; and I should like, very, very much, to go in and visit them for perhaps a week. Will you—won't you allow me to?"

Before the question was out, the instinctive sinking of her heart told what the answer must be. Charles' face

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showed plainly that he had instantly connected Atkinson with Chicago. He frowned as he answered:

"Better have Hollis come up and look you over, I guess."

"But—" she hesitated, afraid of him, yet driven to brave it out: "May I not go?"

"No." He rose. "You may not go to Chicago. You will continue to live in Grangeford, with me." And he left the room.

She was scarcely disappointed. She had not even hoped that he would let her go. There was, indeed, no hope of any kind for her. After a few, slow minutes, she, too, rose, and went upstairs, and dressed, and in some manner got through the dinner and the evening, counting the minutes till night should bring her freedom to express—something: some of her misery and anger and fear.

Thus began again the slow passage of the weeks. Afterwards, Virginia had no recollection of any single incident in the month that followed. Philip's letters served to keep her from desperation. And there was also a faint hope of seeing him—sometime. The spirit of his missives was disquieting, however; for more passionate protestations had never been laid on paper. He loved her, this impotent man. That still was left. And, so long as he was only eighty miles away, so long as she could still dream of being in his arms again, she tried to live, however drearily, and keep her faith alive.

Thirty-eight days went by. Then a great landmark suddenly rose in her monotonous way. When Virginia came down to breakfast on the morning of February

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sixteenth, she found Charles clutching his *Tribune* in a state of great excitement, and the decorous Carson standing behind his chair, actually reading, over his master's shoulder, the first, hasty account of the destruction of the Maine.

## CHAPTER X

As it happened, oddly enough, perhaps, it was a long time before Virginia perceived how much this startling dénouement might mean to her. During breakfast Charles talked a good deal about the gravity of what had happened; and his wife, relieved to see that he had lapsed from the recent studied politeness that had frozen her with dread, listened with well-simulated interest to his remarks. Charles was far too whole-souled a business man to desire war. Therefore, still, in his own mind, refusing to consider war a certainty, he did not mention it as a probable outcome of the disaster. When he left for the factory Virginia retired to her own room, to spend her customary idle morning, not thinking to take the paper with her. It was Lucy Markle who finally opened her eyes. Lucy, knowing all her painful secret, and sympathizing with it as only foolish persons can, was in a state of fluttering anxiety. Returning from her own breakfast in the servants' dining-room, she paused by the toilet-table, holding a tray of soiled brushes, and, after eying her mistress for a minute, observed, mournfully:

"Oh, Madam! How brave you are!"

Virginia stared at her. "Brave?—How?"

Lucy set the brushes down, and clasped her hands before her:

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"Carson says—there's sure to be war, now, you see."

"Really. But why should I fear that?"

Lucy took up her brushes again, looking a little crest-fallen. "I don't know," she muttered. "If Mr. Atkinson had to go—"

Virginia started to her feet. "War!—Philip!—Oh!—Oh, Heavens!" And she sank back again.

For a few minutes Lucy busied herself with salts and cologne. Then her Mistress straightened, and said, quickly: "Bring me the paper—the Chicago *Tribune*!"

But, alas! Charles had carried it off with him; and by this time there would not be one for sale in Grangeford. What should she do? This dreadful fear must be confirmed or proved groundless—somehow. There were five minutes of earnest thought. Then Virginia found her purse and counted the money in it. It contained a little more than five dollars: enough for a return ticket to the city.

"Ah! Now, Lucy, dress me quickly!" cried Virginia. "I am going to Chicago by the 10:30!"

That day Virginia and Philip spent five hours together. Their meeting was one such as only six weeks of separation and the sudden certainty of war could have made possible. On the woman's side these hours almost paid for the lonely misery of the past weeks. And in the eyes of the man she, with her new pallor, and the little, tired droop of eyes and lips lately acquired, had become more exquisite than ever. For him, her fascination never lessened. His was the grand passion. And when they parted again, at the station, late in the afternoon,

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it was with the promise that there should be other meetings—many meetings—such as this one, before the dread future became a more dreadful present. For Philip did not try to deceive her in the truth that war with Spain was now a certainty; and that when it was declared there was no regiment that would be ordered to report for duty sooner than the First Illinois Volunteers.

Virginia arrived in Grangeford at half past six to find Charles at the station, waiting for her with the phaeton. The look in his face, as he silently conducted her to the vehicle, sent a shudder of terror to her heart. And, before they reached the house, she knew that the shudder had not been without cause. Charles did not rage or rail or storm at her. He did not talk very long. But what he did say, in the cold, cutting tone of his deepest anger, reached her soul, and was there transformed into a fount of fear, shame, bitterness, and passionate dislike of him, her husband. During that drive she herself did not utter a word: seeming to disdain any reply to his accusations, in reality too frightened to attempt a defense that might have betrayed her. Silence was the wisest course she could have chosen. For, when they had reached the house and Virginia had retired to her room without even remembering dinner, Charles found himself in his library, pacing heavily up and down the room, his hands clasped behind him, wondering, wondering, helplessly, anxiously, whether his suspicions might not really be false: whether this monstrous jealousy were not actually a monstrous injustice.

That day was never mentioned again between the hus-

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band and the wife. But a repetition of it was made impossible by a very simple means. Virginia had spent all but a few cents of her money on the ticket; and she was not given any more. This wife of a ten times millionaire received, in more than two months' time, less than five dollars in pocket-money! Hitherto, certainly, Van Studdiford had been liberal enough. Virginia had never had to ask for money; but was given a large allowance, besides having all her bills paid without a murmur. Now there was no talk about money. Though her purse should be empty for the rest of her life, she would never ask her tormentor for so much as one cent. This she vowed to herself, passionately; and this attitude Charles covertly watched and was satisfied with.

Weeks passed; and daily some fresh turn of the diplomatic wheel strained a little tighter the relations between the United States and Spain. Daily the feeling throughout the country grew more bitter: the desire for war became more evident. The Court of Inquiry into the causes of the Maine explosion was still droning through its work in Havana when the emergency fund was voted by Congress. It was the twenty-first of March before the court transmitted its report to President McKinley. On the seventh of April, the Powers attempted a gentle remonstrance, which, on the tenth, was seconded by Spain. This had the effect of drawing out the War message, published on the eleventh; and by that time the most conservative had yielded to the inevitable.

Virginia was now living in history—as expressed in unlimited “extra” editions. Every column, paragraph

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or line bearing upon the impending war she devoured; always hoping to find hope: the hope that consisted of Philip's possible safety. Atkinson himself, however, though he tried to refrain from letting her see it in his letters, had caught all the enthusiasm of his regiment, and longed, with the romantic ignorance of the recruit, for an order to the front. As a matter of fact, by temperament and by physique, Philip was eminently fitted to be a soldier. He had all the Bohemian love of un-settlement; all the mere physical courage, all the spirit and vigor and muscle that go to resist exposure, and have, throughout history, served to advance men in the great game of war. Virginia knew nothing of this. She refused, absolutely, to regard Philip in his official light; and, day and night, the possibility of his going tore at her heart, till, at length, it became a certainty.

During the crucial third week in April, however,—that week of weeks at Washington, only half of Atkinson's thoughts were with his regiment. The rest were fully given up to the making of some plan whereby he might see Virginia and say good-by to her.

Already, in a deftly-worded note, he had asked Charles for permission to come to Grangeford to see him and Mrs. Van Studdiford for the last time. Charles' reply was very polite. He was proud of Philip's patriotism: would follow his career with interest: wished, on the part of Mrs. Van Studdiford and himself, all possible good-fortune to his cousin; but would not venture to take up Philip's too valuable time by asking him to spend the greater part of a day in the journey to and from Grangeford.

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Philip laughed over the letter, and was scarcely disappointed. In any case it would not have been particularly interesting to see Virginia in her husband's presence; and hear her say all the conventional things that could only tantalize them both. Yet he had felt bound to make this overture, if only for the sake of Virginia's safety. Now, he could decide between the two other means of gaining his end. It would be easy enough for him to provide Virginia with a ticket to Chicago, where he would meet her. Or, he could reverse the situation, and go to her—privately.

After a careful weighing of the pros and cons, he decided on the latter course. The first plan, so far as the mere day went, would be far the simpler. But there might be consequences to Virginia that he could not allow her to face. Charles might even be driven to begin a systematic plan of spying that would discover and destroy their last refuge: their letters to each other. Therefore, though the thing was difficult—nay, dangerous, in the extreme, he determined to go to her, for farewell.

The affair required the nicest management; and, when at length he had decided to undertake it, the time at his disposal was very short. War, everyone knew, must be formally declared within two days. The call for troops would follow almost within the hour. Every volunteer regiment in the state had been at daily drill for a month or more. And Colonel Turner was the one man absolutely certain to receive marching orders at once. There was, thus, no time to be lost. Philip fixed on the night of the twenty-second of April for his venture; and, on the

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morning of the twenty-first, Virginia had a letter that threw her into a mist of excitement, of terror, of joy.

She answered it at once, filling in the gaps in his plan down to the minutest details. Perhaps she may have realized how serious was the danger in what Philip wished to do. But the feeling that had prompted his plan, the desire to see her alone, overrode all her considerations. She was to have a few more hours with the man she had loved better than everything else in life. They were to be together once more; and his strong arms around her, his voice in her ear, his lips on her lips, would instil into her enough courage, enough strength, to face the summer that must come.

Had Van Studdiford been a reader of faces in other than business interviews, he would surely have gained some inkling of what was preparing around him. From a pale, patient, sometimes sulky melancholy, Virginia's expression had changed to an eager interest and alertness. Her laugh—a nervous little laugh it had become—was but too ready. Her hands were now never still. Color came and went in her face; and a brilliant light gleamed in the formerly dull eyes. But if Charles noticed the change at all, he was far too busy to weight it in the face of the thing that was now troubling him even more than his wife. For war had been declared; and the farmers would want few plows this season.

Dusk, on the evening of the twenty-second of April, fell before seven o'clock. There was a fine mist in the air and the clouds hung low. Virginia and Lucy Markle

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were together in Virginia's bedroom. The toilet was finished; and, downstairs, dinner had been announced. Yet the two lingered, each with the same thought in her mind, till there came, through the twilight, the long whistle of the evening train. Then, still unconsciously, the hands of the women met, in a convulsive clasp.

"He is here," murmured Virginia, softly; and, for one instant, her eyes gleamed full. Then she turned to go down to the long-drawn-out evening that awaited her.

Dinner, and the hour after it, passed as usual. There was little conversation; for Charles was nearly as pre-occupied as his wife. Business was in a precarious state. The stock-market had fallen alarmingly. And, since the formal declaration of war, four of his largest orders for plows had been cut in two. To-night, Charles was considering the advisability of laying off some of the factory men. Therefore he made a perfunctory attempt at talking while he took his coffee in the drawing-room; and then retreated to the library, by that move telling Virginia that she was safe for the night.

It was but a little after nine o'clock when she stood again in her room, hugging to her heart the certainty that somewhere outside, in the damp grounds, Philip was in hiding, till it should be time for the signal that she could not give till Charles was safely upstairs in his room, asleep. This might not be for two, even three hours. And Virginia, looking around her bedroom, sighed, deeply. The shades, according to arrangement, were fast drawn; and the heavy damask curtains that overhung the lace underneath, would prevent any light show-

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ing through till it was wanted. The room was in festal array. Only the small table was occupied prosaically, with a covered tray. Everything else was banked with roses—Philip's roses—arranged not so fantastically as of old, because Virginia had not dared, but forming, nevertheless, a radiant background to her figure.

Presently Lucy appeared, to dress her; and in preparing her Mistress for the rôle she loved best to see her play, Lucy was, undeniably, an artist. By ten o'clock Virginia was ready: gowned in a long negligée of accordéon-plaited chiffon-cloth of palest yellow, her hair coiled low on her neck, her complexion, in its delicate fairness, glowing brightly, her feet clothed in scarlet stockings and Turkish slippers of the same hue. As she rose from the dressing-table, the last amber comb in place, Lucy walked round her as usual, pronounced her correct, and broke into a smile: the only expression of satisfaction or admiration that she ever permitted herself.

Upon this same remarkable Lucy rested the heaviest responsibilities of the night. But with her, a truly invaluable maid, nothing save her Lady's appearance ever seemed to weigh very heavily. As Virginia lay back in her morris chair, watching the girl move about the room removing all traces of the toilet, putting finishing touches here and there to all those things which, unlike other men, Philip was wont to notice, she wondered at her, vaguely: wondered why in the world she was content to remain here, year by year, in a country town, where her only excitements were also encumbered with danger so great that few would have endured even their possibility

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for a day. And the secret of Lucy's faithfulness seems explainable only on one score, with which her undoubted loyalty to Virginia, the beloved, scarcely seems compatible. Lucy, in fine, was an enigma.

When everything was ready, and the room exactly what it should have been: bower and background for any scene, Lucy Markle turned to her Mistress and suggested, quietly:

"Do you think, Madam, that the lights should go out now?"

"The lights, Lucy? Why?"

She made a deprecating gesture. "Prudence is best, Mrs. Van Studdiford. Mr. Van Studdiford is not upstairs yet. We have got to wait for some time; and when he comes up he ought to think you asleep.—There is a keyhole: cracks, perhaps. They would show light, and then he might wish to see you, you know. You should lie down. I will listen and watch; and, when it is all safe, I will light the lamp and put it in the window."

"Is it still raining, Lucy?" asked Virginia.

"Yes, Madam."

There was a moment's silence. Perhaps both women were with Philip, there in the darkness and wet. Nevertheless, both knew well the cost of one false step. Therefore Virginia said, at last, faintly: "Put them out, then."

There was a movement from Lucy, a click:—darkness.

Two hours went by. Afterwards, Virginia, recalling every incident of the night, remembered so little of these that she realized that she must have dozed after a

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time. And yet during the first half-hour she had certainly been sensible of each passing second. Then came a period of oblivion. After that she was aware, after what had been an interminable period, of Charles' step on the stair. It seemed, vaguely, as if Lucy ought to come now, with the light. Then it occurred to her that Charles must have sat up all night: that it was morning, and Philip gone. Even this did not fully rouse her. She grew more and more insensible, till, suddenly, there was a bright light in her eyes, and she could hear Lucy's voice, whispering:

“I think everything is safe, now!”

Virginia started up. Lucy had raised the shade of the middle window in the bay, and had placed in it a small lamp, brightly burning. Her mistress ran to the adjacent window, raised it slightly, and knelt down, listening. One minute passed. Two. And then, from the darkness below, whistled in Philip's tones, came, low and clear, the old, familiar air from Carmen:

“*Toreador enga-a-arde!*”

Virginia sprang to her feet, her eyes aflame. “Go, Lucy! Quickly! Quickly!—Bring him to me!”

Lucy, shoeless, moving as softly as a cat, left the room, passed through the boudoir, her own chamber, down the back stairs, and step by step, along the hall, past the smoking-room, past the coat-closet, to the side-door, the lock and hinges of which she had oiled that day.

And Virginia, above, was also occupied. She had removed the light from the window, and closed the shade again. The lamp she placed on her dressing-table, where

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it shed a soft light over the whole room. Then, her heart beating furiously, the blood pounding through her temples, she waited—waited—waited, for the arrival of Philip.

The four or five minutes that passed seemed as many years. Then came a buoyant step through the boudoir. Philip, joyous, triumphant, stood on the threshold of her room. She went to him, slowly, hands outstretched, her soul in her eyes. She read him, hungrily, and in the reading found—all that she wished. After the long embrace she drew off a little, smiling amid tears.

“Have you come through the air, Prince, without hat or coat? We thought you would be so wet——”

“Lucy has my things. They’re not bad. I’ve been in the barn nearly all the time, like a tramp, O my beloved!” and he smiled, radiantly, as his eyes travelled over her perfect figure.

Virginia also smiled. Then, turning to the table that stood near at hand, she drew the cloth from the tray. “This is our supper,” she said. “There is only a bottle of claret. I wouldn’t have champagne, because——”

“Because?” he repeated, gently, as he saw her lip quiver.

“Because it is our—parting night. And I don’t want any—any exhilaration. I must be just myself;—you, yourself. You don’t mind?”

“No,” he answered, quietly. And she was satisfied.

They ate the little meal—pâté sandwiches, a cold chicken, strawberries,—together. And, as they ate, their talk, which had begun with a pretense at gayety, grew broken, and faint. Soon Philip pushed his plate away,

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rose, and, head bent, hands clasped at the back, began noiselessly to pace the room. Virginia sat still, watching him. The look on his face was new to her. It disturbed her not a little. She beheld Philip fighting, for one of the few times in his life, between two powerful inclinations. The result of the battle as well as its subject was announced when, suddenly, he turned to her and whispered, passionately:

“I can’t leave you!”

And then—she showed her strength. As he stood beside her she laid her two hands upon his arm, firmly:

“You will leave me,” she said, quietly, “before the dawn. But, Philip, when the war is over, and you come back, if—if I need it, if I ask it, if I can bear no more from—*him*,” she made a slight gesture, “will you, then, take me away from here, for always?”

He caught her in his arms. “It is what I want above all things on earth!” he said.

“You promise?”

“I swear it!”

And in this vow he was sincere. For Philip had long since transcended his own nature. He loved as few can love: unselfishly.

## CHAPTER XI

THIS parting with Philip, the third in the first year of their love, was, despite the certain dangers of battle into which her beloved was going, easier to Virginia than the others had been. She now had certain effective expedients of solitude (how painfully learned!) that could be depended upon. Moreover, in relinquishing Philip to the honor of the United States all the latent nobility, the heroism, in her, was appealed to; and, better yet, Philip's movements would, from now on, be part of those movements which every newspaper in the country would be occupied in watching and chronicling; not a printed sheet that she could pick up all through the summer to come, but would have for her almost the interest of a letter from him.

During the following months of Spring and Summer Virginia devoted herself, for hours daily, to reading the record of the history that was making from Cuba to the Philippines. The battles of Matanzas and Manila Bay were followed with a prayerful thankfulness that Philip was not in the navy; and then, immediately, she would sicken with the dread of that danger which must surely be in store for him.

May passed almost rapidly. It was the thirteenth of that month before the First Illinois broke camp at Spring-

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field and were transported Southward, to Camp Thomas at Chickamauga, where they remained only a fortnight, and then proceeded to Tampa, with but one more stage between them and the heart of the fighting. From the three camps Virginia received many letters, most of them sent, under cover, to Lucy; a few direct to her, in order that Charles' suspicions, if he had any now, might always be centred around his wife:—Lucy being infinitely too valuable in other ways to run the risk of dismissal. These letters, and all that followed from Cuba, being especially precious to Virginia, she kept them locked in that golden box given her as a wedding-present by Mme. Dupré. And to this same Georgiana, his adored sister, Philip, before he left for Springfield, had entrusted, for safe keeping, the bundle of letters written by Virginia while he was in the West, and, later, in Chicago, separated from her.

May passed without any action in that small island on which the gaze of two continents was centred. June opened with the junction of the American fleet and the Flying Squadron off Santiago de Cuba. Two days later the country was ringing with the names of Hobson and his seven men. Then followed various skirmishes round Camp McCalla, on the Guantanamo shore. Finally, on the thirteenth, part of a real army, under Shafter, left Tampa for Santiago; and thenceforward the United States watched with bated breath: nor found the waiting long.

From the middle of June till the first of July, a battle, the first great land battle of the war, was expected daily.

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Reports sent Northward were confused, contradictory, pregnant with possibilities. Up to the eighteenth of the month Virginia knew that the First Illinois was still in Tampa. After that—no one was sure.

June went out as General Merritt sailed for the Philippines. July entered with a hush of foreboding and expectancy that centred round a certain mysterious Cuban height. At the beginning of this week of weeks, such days as had not been known since American women had knelt, trying to pray, and could only strain their ears for news from Richmond, began the great strike of Newspaper stereotypers in Chicago. For four days—the vital four, no news was obtainable of what was going on at Siboney, at el Caney, at San Juan Hill. Rumor was abroad in the land. Everyone knew that a great battle was being fought. No one knew what Illinois regiments were engaged. One could only wait, hoping, wretchedly, that in time the lists of dead and wounded might be published correctly.

How it happened that Virginia endured that entire week in silence, she did not know. Afterwards it came back to her as some horrid dream. At the time, all that made restraint possible was Van Studdiford's own great excitement. Hitherto, through all the weeks of preparation, he had viewed the situation in scornful apathy. He had habitually made light of it; and, on the resignation of the Spanish cabinet, which came on May fifteenth, he prophesied that peace would be declared inside of a month. But he was awake at last, and it seemed that some real patriotism lay hidden in his nature. No one could fail to

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understand that what was now going on in that far-off tropical island was no child's play. And Virginia, seeing him grow red and furious as he studied the meagre, ill-arranged reports in the single sheet of the Grangeford paper, now issued daily, found it far easier to lock within her breast all the sick terror, the wretchedness of uncertainty, that she must bear alone.

Sunday, the third day of July in that year of '98, was a day to be remembered forever. After luncheon, Virginia, her head aching with heat, throbbing with the noise of premature celebrations, her heart sick with the dread of sudden news, retired to her room and lay down, while Lucy bathed her head and uttered the few possible words of comfort: all those "perhapses" that the last three days had worn threadbare.

Virginia could neither rest nor sleep. Her brain was on fire, her imagination taking wildest flights. She lay, her eyes closed, staring into a tropic wilderness dotted with motionless, prostrate, khaki-coated boys, toward whose bodies, from undetectable concealment, poured swift, invisible missiles of death. She saw Philip there, worn, soiled, haggard, exhausted with fighting, but alive among the dead. She saw the gun in his hand raised unsteadily to his shoulder. She watched his shaking aim. And then, suddenly, without any warning, the gun dropped. He swayed, where he knelt. His arms went up. In the next instant he was numbered with the rest of the motionless ones that lay upon the slippery ground.

When this vision had passed, many times, before her mental vision, Virginia rose, and half hysterically bade

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Lucy leave her. She could not but believe, in her secret heart, that that scene had been sent her—a photograph of Philip's present. Numb by that fear, she rose and rearranged her hair, dressed herself, pinned a rose in her belt, where it resembled a splash of blood on the white of her gown, and went downstairs. Aimlessly seeking any distraction, she passed through the screen of the front door, and stood for a moment on the broad veranda, watching a band of little boys across the road place a battery of crackers in a mud fort.

The day had been intensely hot; but a light breeze had suddenly risen in the east and blew across Virginia's cheek like a caress from a gentle hand. She was suddenly transported, in memory, to that day, just a year before, that Sunday, the second of the month, when Philip had come home from the West. How vivid, how pitiless, the memory was! No day in her whole life—not her wedding-day, was impressed so clearly upon her mind. Standing here now, she could breathe the fragrance of the orchard, hear the ripple of the river, see the melting softness of the long, dying shadows of that exquisite evening when he had come to her, come back to her, among the orchard trees.

Leaning her tired head against a pillar, she surrendered herself to this memory, and let it tear as it would at her heart-strings. Around her poured the radiant July sunlight. The drone of bees mingled itself with the sharp "crack! crack!" from the miniature fort. This great, Northern world, echoing faintly the din of long-won battles, was infinitely peaceful. By degrees, in the sunshine,

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her vision of blood was blotted out and replaced by other pictures.

Suddenly, with a sharpness that made her quiver, the telephone, which hung in the hall, rang loudly. She had started toward it when Van Studdiford unexpectedly emerged from the library and took up the receiver. After his "hello" there were some seconds—half a minute, perhaps—of silence. Virginia found that she was listening intently. Then there burst from Charles' lips the two words:

"Good God!"

The world around her grew black. She remained against the pillar, perfectly still, her eyes shut, watching, watching over Philip, as he lay, quiet, in the wilderness.

After a moment or two Charles came out to the veranda, looked at her, curiously, but discovered nothing unusual in her appearance.

"It was a telegram from Clowry, of the Western Union," he said. "There being no papers, he is sending a few messages to friends.—It is reported that the Spaniards have mined the trenches before Santiago, and have blown up a thousand of our men.—There's been a big sea-fight, too, but nobody knows yet how it's gone."

Though the world still spun, Virginia opened her eyes. "What—regiments were in the trenches?" she asked, hoarsely.

Charles glared at her, perceiving instantly where her thoughts lay. "I have not heard where the First is," he said, shortly. Then, turning on his heel, he reentered the house.

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The suspense lasted for two more days. Then the Chicago strike ended, and East and West joined in enthusiastic praise of the victories by land and sea, the heroism of the Regular Army, the unparalleled daring of the Rough Riders. It was a week more before a letter from Atkinson arrived, proving to Virginia the folly of visions. But the letters that came from him thereafter, from July to September, while less passionate than some that had gone before, told so much, so well, from a volunteer point of view, that they would have formed rather a valuable little addition to the regimental annals. The first letter began thus:

“ON BOARD TRANSPORT ‘Carey,’ *en route* for—  
“Shafter may know where! KEY WEST, July 3, ‘98.

“If I hadn’t brought with me, and you hadn’t added to, a large package of your letters, I should certainly be tempted to desert: for the sake of standing on dry land for five minutes, and learning what has happened, behind us and before. There is a rumor—we live on rumors—that the boys at Siboney are waiting for our arrival to storm Santiago. If so, we’re giving the Spaniards plenty of time to make their wills—and a little over. We’ve been at anchor here, in heat that would turn a lobster red in the water, for three mortal days, and no shore leave for anyone.—It is surely the ‘Board of Strategy’ at Washington that have had this inspiration. Ugh! All the same, a man of Hart’s company did get ashore, last night (I’ve just heard this), sent a message to his family, by some outrageous bluff to the official operator, and also came back with enough astonishing tales to keep us all busy

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cursing for another day or two. He says that el Caney and San Juan Hill have been carried, and all the work done. But as we've been hearing variations of the same thing for two weeks or so, no one does more than whisper it to his neighbor and then wink.—By Heaven, if it's true!—We'll be the maddest lot of recruits that ever escaped the surgeon!

“ — Virginia! Do you hate me for daring to think of anything, care for anything, but you, while I write—or while I work, or eat or sleep? Beloved!—I can't deny that I do, really, care for the things I have before me now. But, indeed, it is the image of you in my heart—in my soul, my beautiful one!—that makes these delays bearable, the heat endurable, and all the hardships and roughnesses of camp of so little consequence. For the last fortnight in Tampa I told you that we were chosen out of nearly a dozen other regiments for extra guard duty at the wharves.—I didn't say that every three days I had to be on duty for a straight twenty-four hours. At night I could always keep myself alert by remembering as many beautiful pictures you have made for me, as many of your exquisite poses; as I could. I never got beyond six or eight: for they brought you so close that I—well, I thought of anything on earth in order to drag my thoughts away again.—My Beautiful!—My beautiful woman! Be patient. Be true to me. For I am coming back to you; and there will come a day when we shall not part again.—Oh, God! Will that happiness really come?

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“ I've just been on deck, to hear more rumors to the

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effect that we sail to-morrow. These delays are bad in more ways than one. If a soldier can actually settle down to patience and philosophy, he has lost his keenness for active service when the time comes to show it. If he is rampant (and we all are) at delays that seem absolutely unnecessary, he wears himself completely out, fretting.

"We're really quite an imposing sight when we get under way. There are the First Illinois—what Lieutenants do you know in that distinguished regiment, Madam? —the First D. C., two divisions of Randolph's artillery, and a wagon train, all on transports, under guard of two squat gunboats, the 'Helena' and the 'Mathias,' besides a sea-going tug. We manage to make about five miles an hour—perhaps six, at our wildest. But apparently now we have stopped never to move again.

"'Dream of my delight,' that is not how I shall come to you.—I catch myself whistling the 'Toreador' song twenty times a day; and I always break off with an ache in my heart.—Oh, there will be red roses in—our room—again, some night!

"Write me always. The letters are so slow in coming that I starve for them, and need a great many at once to make up for the endless waiting.

"I kiss your hands, your eyes, your lips, your heart!

"PHILIP."

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"IN THE TRENCHES, EAST OF SANTIAGO,  
"July 14th (afternoon).

(Written on sheets torn from an old note book, enclosed in a very dirty envelope, and addressed, as it was written, in pencil.)

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“ MY DARLING: Forgive me, first of all, for the conventional beginning, which you dislike. It is so good to write out the word that has made the last three days endurable! I shall apologize for nothing else. It is enough that I am able to write you at all.

“ If you could see me! No—I should fly from you.—I haven’t washed since we left the transport, though I have been soaked through most of that time. I have a four days’ growth of beard on my face. My clothes are so wrinkled, and shrunken and muddy that the uniform isn’t distinguishable. My shelter is a tree; for there isn’t a tent in the regiment. I’ve had one hunk of hard-tack and a lump of beef as big as my thumb since morning; for it’s my day out of the trenches; and we get less to eat when we’re ‘resting.’

“ Rest!—I have more of it than the others, though; for I carry the joy of you everywhere in my heart. And with all the discomfort, you needn’t think of us as in very great danger here. The real danger is in the climate:—weeks of alternate cloud-bursts, and heat that only one word can describe.

“ I love you, my woman of women! I have worshipped you enough, in the last four days, to canonize you—if you only knew. I’ve no idea when or where I can write again. But my first and last thoughts are all of my Lady. Write, then! I’m so hungry for a word!

“ PHILIP.

“ P. S. You’d shout with laughter if you could see the Colonel’s Shirt!”

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"CAMP ON KETTLE HILL, July 20th.

"Well, it is all over. After all we only came in, as you will know by now, for the tail end of everything; The glory belongs entirely to the Rough Riders, I suppose. But I swear no lot of men ever spent a worse week than we did—from the night of the tenth to the seventeenth, the day of the great surrender.

"We have seen few heroics, and none of the ceremonial. One or two tents and some decent food had come up from Siboney, and we were preparing to settle down respectably to a sort of Vicksburg period of sharp-shooting and trench-work, when the miserable Dons hung out their white flag. Wish we had an enemy worth while! Then, on the eighteenth, we, *we*, the 'dandy first,' were ordered up here to take care of a couple of thousand 'Caballeros,' much better fed and housed than we are, and to see that none of 'em escape;—which they wouldn't do if they could. So behold your lover a Turnkey!

"From force of habit, I write those things that occupy my mind. You seem infinitely far away from me to-day; for I am beginning to realize what an endless, dull business the finishing up of this war is going to be. We fellows are all sore that we seemed to be hauled in only at the last moment, after the real fighting had been done, just to take up the tedious work. Oh, when I think that, during the four tremendous days, we lay still, like idiots, in little boats off Key West, I'm ready to lay about me with a bayonet! This may not be soldierly talk; but nobody knows quite how much it——"

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(*An hour later.*)

"The most beautiful interruption! Oh my beloved—my beloved—you are there, a star in the North, waiting for me! You know, by now, surely, that I am quite safe, that we were not at San Juan Hill.—And the yarn of the mined trenches is only one of a thousand impossible lies. How *could* an enemy mine a new trench, held, night and day, by the men that dug it? We don't *all* sleep on duty, you know,—though sleeping under fire really gets to be quite simple, the Twelfth Regulars tell us.

"Grangeford! Dear, dull, dry Grangeford! And you in it, at the mercy of that miserable pack of women.—Marion Hunt, dearest, was born to be an old maid; and I don't think anyone ever dreamed of disturbing the Lord's plan. Do you wonder that bitterness has taken root in her?—Sweet Lady, do not let them disturb you. Ah, my promise was from the heart! I will come to you. And you and I will finish our lives together, somewhere far beyond the little world, finding heaven years before we die.

"I want to stop writing, now. I want just to lie and dream of you. You are suddenly so near, so real, so blessed! God in His mercy keep you for me!

"PHILIP."

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"CAMP HOSPITAL, August 16th.

"I have been here for four days, Virginia; but I really don't know why. I am not especially ill. And yet, all the quinine and whiskey a fellow can absorb won't counteract the effect of this climate on a Northern constitution.

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"This is my good day. Sanborn, our senior Major and the best fellow alive, found me, unexpectedly, in a fit of 'shakes' last Sunday. He sent one of the surgeons up to me, and then they brought me here. There are plenty of us, I can tell you. Some of them are bad; and it's maddening to listen to them calling out for their families. But I don't think it's going hard with me. It is too slow coming.

"I'm a little tired. I wish it was time for the breeze. That's heaven.—You're heaven, too, Virginia. I always adore you. But you see, dear, this pen is a bad one, and the nurse is watching me. Good-bye for awhile.

"PHILIP."

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"MONTAUK POINT, LONG ISLAND,

*"Sunday, September 10th.*

"This is the most perfect camp in the world. And Long Island is the most beautiful place in the world—except one. And if you were here, my Virginia, this would be the happiest day I have ever known. For I am convalescent, at last. This morning I was allowed to have my clothes on and walk about. I have had ice-cream for my Sunday dinner: it hasn't tasted so good since I was five. And now, after an enforced nap, I am permitted the blessedness of writing to you. It is so long, dear, since I heard from you. Surely you haven't known where I was, or you would have written to me—? I have been able to read a little for a week; but I've only cared to see something in your handwriting. I had the old letters brought me from my kit as soon as I came to

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myself at all; and I keep them under my pillow right along. They make me sleep so well!

“But it isn’t possible, is it? that you are tired of me? It isn’t possible that I am just a vain fool, lying here dreaming of your love, when I was only the object of some passing fancy that you have already forgotten? Great God, Virginia, if I believed this—I would enlist in the regular army, and be off for Porto Rico in a week! I couldn’t bear it! I—

“But that’s not true. I know you better, royal Lady. It can never be true that, after all we have been through—all we have loved, all we have suffered, you didn’t really care, with all your soul, as I did! Is it?—Oh, I shouldn’t have believed I could be so abject before any woman. Do you know what I have dreamed about, whenever I have been sane enough to control my dreams at all? I have been dreaming that I might go back to the old Grange-ford place. I have dreamed of working for Charles again. Yes, actually! For the sake of living in the same house with you, I wish to forget all that passed, on Christmas day, between him and me. I want a reconciliation.

“Must I believe that you are indifferent to this? Must I force myself not to dream till I hear your decision? Well, I shall have a relapse, and die.—I feel it beginning already.—No, my Lady, it is not fever. It is a relapse of love; and, as you have long known, mine is a fatal case. Beloved, I love you! I love you!—I hold you in my arms. Write me, then, the instant you receive this, and bring me back to life again. PHILIP.”

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"GRANGEFORD, Wednesday, September 13th.

" Philip! Philip! Philip! Shall I laugh, or cry, or do both at once? I have done all three since Lucy gave me your letter, this afternoon. It has released me from the keenest agony I have ever known. Oh, you cannot *dream* what the last month has been! Your poor, pitiful little letter from the Cuban hospital took ten days getting to me. Then, I simply deluged you with letters. Did not *one* of them really reach you? Where in the world have they gone, then? Oh, what a hateful mail system we have! Dispatches and business letters are never lost; but *our* kind—the letters of the heart and soul—are not thought to be worth delivery!

" My boy! If only I could get to you! If I could take you into my arms and breathe into you all the strength of my love! Oh, it seems to me I cannot live, with you there, alone, suffering!

" But, dear, even if my letters did not get to you, how could you, how *dared* you, doubt me? After what I have done, after all I have endured through this hideous summer, could you, for one instant, accuse me of a 'passing fancy'?—Cruel!

" And now about your 'dream':—that adorable dream, that *I* have had ever since the twenty-sixth of last December. Absurd, or miserable, man, to ask for my 'decision.' What do you suppose it is? I pray you, on my knees, to come home, at once. I pray you to be reconciled to Charles, at whatever cost. What shall I do? Can I help, in any way? Ah, he suspects me, you know. It would never do for me to speak your name to him. But

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if there is anything else—if I could write your brothers, or go to see Mme. Dupré, to ask her to use her influence?—Oh! you will let me help you, will you not?

“Only, my darling, come to me. If you do not, soon, I cannot endure it. I have borne the summer, because you were so far beyond my reach. But oh! The terror!—the terror after that letter written in the trenches! Do you know, in the very least, what it means to be a woman, a wretched, stay-at-home woman, with all she loves in such hideous danger?—I didn’t sleep for weeks. How it has all been concealed, I do not know. There have been days when my brain has been positively turned.

“But it is over. You are coming home. Yes! Yes! You *are* coming home. Everyone says that the volunteers are to be mustered out immediately; and, even before that, you will get leave. I love you. Therefore you will come to me.—Do you like my logic, Monsieur?

“I could write to you for a whole month, of course, without once pausing. But, you see, it is eleven o’clock, and there must not be a light in my room when Charles comes up. You *want* me to stop now, don’t you?

“With love, and love and love! all there is in the world!”

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(A telegram sent to Mme. Eugène Dupré, Lexington Hotel, Chicago, September 20th, 1898.)

“Three months’ leave. Start for Chicago to-day. Am coming to you.

PHILIP.”

## CHAPTER XII

ATKINSON reached Chicago on the afternoon of the twenty-third of September:—a Saturday. And, from that day to the third week in October, the time, for him and the little group of people to whom he formed a centre of interest, was filled with that incomprehensible purposelessness of behavior that makes Life so continual a puzzle to the reasoning onlooker. Most of this wasting of opportunity Philip was entirely responsible for. By every law of human nature and human consistency, he should have rushed off to Grangeford, openly or secretly, on the day or night of September 24th. Actually, it was a month before he made any attempt to see the woman he had professed to and really did love so recklessly. His conduct, however, was clear not even to himself. It was certainly anything but clear to the unhappy Virginia, for whom this one month was longer than the past six had been. She wrote two letters to Philip: the first exquisitely tender and loving; the second a passion of anger, of misery, of reproach—that came near taking him to her. But—oh ye little gods!—the thing which, at the last minute, held him back, was the fact that, during his fever, his head had been shaved; and he felt that he could not bring himself to let Virginia see him with a mere suspicion of dark fuzz replacing the former well-brushed, irrepressible black locks! Of such is the nature of man.

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Meantime, Philip was by no means unhappy. Civilization, tempting food, old haunts, old companions, and, whenever he wished it, a very pretty drawing-room and a very charming woman, Georgiana, at his disposal, were soul-satisfying luxuries, after the rough camp life and the clean bareness of the hospital. He was also gaining strength every day; and the assiduous use of hair-tonic had been productive of gratifying results. By the second week in October his brain was afire twenty times a day at thought of Virginia; and he knew that he could not much longer delay action there. He even began to take to himself a little melancholy credit for having so long resisted the temptation of possibly compromising her! For these various reasons, then, one evening, late in the month, when his Brothers happened to be dining at the Lexington, Master Philip took occasion to open up, very diplomatically, the possibility of his returning to Charles' service.

Leslie and James, properly unsuspicious of ulterior motives, proved amenable to an un hoped-for degree. Indeed, they were extremely desirous of seeing their erratic Brother once more in the care of his admirable cousin. (Alas! How many times had not these estimable men wished that Brother and Cousin might have been changed about!) And they were very willing to treat with Van Studdiford, provided only that Philip were resolved to behave as well as possible in future should they succeed in their attempt at reinstatement. This task they had performed twice before; and they felt that this time they had more than usual to urge in Philip's favor. Certainly, as a

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soldier he had acquitted himself well, having already received papers promoting him to a captaincy of volunteers. And he had, moreover, been given to understand that there would be little difficulty, did he wish it, in obtaining a commission in the regular army. A high honor, truly, for Philip! However, the mustering out of the volunteers was close at hand; and even the Brothers never for a moment considered the possibility of Philip's entering the regular army: a thing which he would certainly have done had it not been for a certain worn and fragile woman in Grangeford.

After the coffee had been served, solemn James and dignified Leslie, each assuming an air a trifle more dignified, a little more solemn, inquired, very delicately, into the exact cause of the quarrel between Charles and Philip which had resulted in the last separation. Philip shrugged and explained:

"Van Studdiford had been bilious for a month. He was also very much annoyed, about that time, over a delay in his project of a branch house in Phœnix. It promised to be a fine investment; but the land he insisted upon getting was very mixed as to title. I did my best to work the thing out correctly; but there was one point that wasn't to be straightened. He charged me with bungling it.—Of course, I didn't care to force him to keep me, if he was dissatisfied with my work."

The Brothers stared at each other, neither one of them noticing the very amused expression that had appeared on their sister's face. It seemed an unreasonable thing on Charles' part to have dismissed Philip for a

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thing which a lawyer perhaps could not have managed. But it was like Philip, very like Philip, of course, to have flown into a temper and resigned his position because his employer was reproving him, perhaps not without reason, for some piece of carelessness. While the Brothers turned these things over in their minds, Philip and Georgiana were carrying on a telegraphic conversation of glances; and Philip was learning that his sister, who suspected something of the real situation, considered that he had made very poor work of inventing his excuse.

At a quarter to eleven, after a little more talking and a tacit understanding that Charles was to be approached very soon, the elder Atkinsons departed toward their sober apartment on Indiana Avenue; and Philip and Mme. Dupré were left alone together in her green drawing-room.

Georgiana was the most tactful of women; but she had, in her complex nature, a very large amount of curiosity concerning the affairs of people whom she cared for. When the Brothers had gone, then, she gave Philip to understand that it was not yet bed-time. She settled him comfortably in a deep chair, with a decanter of Bourbon and a syphon at his elbow; and then seated herself opposite him, took a cigarette from the gold case at her belt, lighted it, daintily, and began to scrutinize her Brother through the smoke.

Philip endured the survey serenely. Georgiana was welcome to probe, when he and she were alone together. He had forgotten her presence, indeed, and had let himself drift to Grangeford, when she began, softly:

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" Philip, mon cher, that charming little girl—Charles' wife (both times I have seen her she has made me think of nothing so much as a rare piece of porcelain),—is it not really she who is at the bottom of this quarrel between you and our stout cousin?"

Philip's lips curved into a slight smile. *Tête-à-tête* with her he was not dismayed at her inspirations. " What made you so amused over it, before those infernal sticks?"

She laughed outright, this time. " Chéri—it was only James' expression. Forgive me. But I can never get used to him. Where did they get their dreariness?" She paused, and Atkinson did not fill the silence. Then, taking the situation into her hands again, she ventured: " But you have tired of the little lady? She has ceased to interest this fickle brother of mine?"

" No, by Heaven, she has not!—She will never cease to interest me.—Georgie, I can't put her away from me for an hour!"

" Vraiment!—then, why—why—why!—Good Heavens, Philip, if a man made love to me, and came home, after a six months' absence, to stay eighty miles away from me for a month, I should—hate him forever!"

Philip looked over at her, surveyed, lazily, her perfect figure in its décolleté gown of shining jet, her finely-moulded, passionate face, her deep blue eyes, her high crown of vivid hair, and said, softly: " No man, dear, who had had the great luck to take your fancy, could stay away from you for three days."

As she laughed, a little color crept up her face; for

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Philip's praise meant more to her than that of a lover. Nevertheless, she would not drop her point. "Have you given a thought to that poor child's suffering, Philip?"

He rose quickly. "What a wicked mind you have," he observed, with the smile that came only from his eyes. "Don't you realize how much better it would be for her if she never saw me again?"

She also rose, meeting his hard look with one of great tenderness. "There is no woman in the world who could be better off for not seeing you, Philip!"

This, from the fellow's sister!

. . . . .

There were no men in Chicago, few in the whole West, perhaps, more respectable, more trustworthy, more honorable, than Leslie and James Atkinson. On the first Saturday after their talk with Philip they journeyed to Grangeford and met Van Studdiford, by appointment, in his office at eleven o'clock. Charles received them courteously and coldly; for he had an inkling of their errand. Undisturbed, however, by his manner, which, indeed, they considered admirably suited to any business, they proceeded at once to their task, and really acquitted themselves very creditably: James presenting their wish and arguing the advisability of its adoption, and Leslie holding himself in readiness to answer questions.

Charles gave them no answer that day. But when they took their departure, having declined his invitation to luncheon, he promised them a decision by letter on the following Monday; wherewith they expressed themselves satisfied.

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After they had gone Charles sat, for an hour or more, over his desk, thinking. It was not so much the force of James' reasoning which caused him to hesitate at his first, quick thought that it was impossible for Philip ever to come to Grangeford again. It was Philip's own recent behavior that plead for him. He had been away from Chicago more than six months, in Cuba two, and, so far as he had been able to discover, his wife had, during that time, received but three, or at most four, letters from him. (Lucy had stood them, as always, in good stead.) Moreover, a far more salient point, Philip had now been within easiest reach for over three weeks, and had made no attempt to get to Grangeford. And Philip's anger at the old quarrel would not have held out, Charles very well knew, had there been any sufficient reason why it should cease.

Van Studdiford went home that night and tried hard to read his wife's heart through her face. But had Virginia been aware of the test she was undergoing, she could not have made herself more impenetrable. She was now living on resurrected pride. Throughout that hardest of summers, she had been obliged to draw very heavily upon her resources; and thus now, when it seemed that the end of all things had come, when Philip had actually deserted her, she rose above her great desolation, and presented, to her narrow world, an impalpable face, expressionless eyes, a subdued manner, which, however, betrayed not a tenth of her wretchedness. Her heart was frozen. After the first week, after the sending of the wild letter, she had not felt anything keenly. Her nerves

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had been deadened by what she had passed through. And her husband, observing her this evening as he had never observed her before, could not but perceive that her face bore none of the signs he expected. No sudden light escaped her dull eyes. The rigid mask was never accidentally raised. The mouth found nothing in the secret thoughts at which now and then to smile, covertly. By the end of the evening Van Studdiford would have taken his oath that Philip and his wife had not met since April.

And if all those old, wretched suspicions were really wrong, Charles knew that he had treated his cousin monstrously. Philip's work, in fact, had never been so well done as at the time when he was discharged. And thus Van Studdiford, whose family feeling toward these relatives of his was strong, spent a sleepless night and rather a long Sunday. In the end, it was on Sunday night, not Monday, that he dispatched the promised letter, bidding Captain Atkinson come to see him on Tuesday morning.

Accordingly, at that time, Philip presented himself, punctually, at the familiar office of the familiar factory. The private door was opened to him at once; and the ensuing interview was short and satisfactory. When Philip emerged, he went at once to his desk, and, in twenty minutes, was hard at work.

At noon, however, Atkinson sustained a shock of surprise. He was quite as astonished as his companions, who had forgotten everything save that he had been in the war, when Charles left the factory at his usual time, climbed into a waiting dog-cart, and drove off homeward without a word to his cousin. Philip was astonished;

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and he was also bitterly chagrined. All the morning he had counted upon seeing her. All the morning he had been picturing their meeting, wondering just how angry, how unapproachable, she would be. And then, in the evening again—he was brought up once more, swiftly. Would Charles expect him to stay at the house that night? It was difficult to say; but, judging from his behavior this noon, he would not. Could it be possible that he had accepted a position with the Van Studdiford Company, at seventy-five dollars a month, for the sake of spending the rest of his days in a factory and his nights in a third-rate hotel? For five minutes he did not know whether to swear or to laugh. Then temperament triumphed. He laughed—and went over to the “Gloucester House” for luncheon.

From Tuesday to Saturday Philip lived and worked in Grangeford as Charles had intended he should. Acting on an inspiration, suspecting, when he had had time for meditation, that he was being tried, Philip said not a word to anyone, presented to his cousin a pleasantly impassive face, made no attempt to communicate with Virginia, and never let it be surmised that, after one more week of such life, should there be no results, he would leave the factory and the town for the last time. He had played poker long enough and well enough to know how to carry a bluff through to its natural end.

By Thursday night Charles was beginning to feel his faith in his cousin’s honesty of purpose considerably strengthened. For three days he had watched him, closely. For yet another day he let the matter go. Then, on Sat-

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urday, he gave him his reward. As the noon whistle blew, the "boss" appeared at Atkinson's desk, and remarked, pleasantly:

"Glad if you'll come up and lunch with us to-day, Phil."

In spite of himself, Philip felt that a suspicion of color was creeping up his face. "Thank you," he answered. "I accept, with pleasure. You put up rather a better table than the 'Gloucester House,' if I remember correctly."

Charles laughed, and the two left the factory together: to all appearances, as amicably as of old.

The drive was a strange one to Atkinson. He had not really been prepared for the invitation; and, even in his eagerest moments, he had scarcely realized how the surety of seeing Virginia would affect him. The town drifted by, a glory of red and gold; for there was a wind to-day, and the maples were recklessly scattering their treasure all abroad. Everything was so familiar, so intimately connected with keenest memory! The sharp freshness of the air acted on his brain almost like alcohol. The clack of Meteor's hoofs, the rush of the breeze, the sudden bird-callings, every slightest noise, united in the great chorus that was crying in his ears: "Virginia!" "Virginia!"

And then, suddenly, the drive was over. They had halted at the familiar step. The groom was at Meteor's head. Charles was descending.

That morning Virginia had lingered late in bed. It was past eleven before she went down to the drawing-

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room and seated herself, according to old custom, at the piano, over her books of Chopin. How drearily familiar they were—all those exquisite heart-melodies, in their fantastic, minor settings, amid the suggestive inweavings of other airs that echo like sad memories of a half-forgotten past. Virginia could play by heart half the *nocturnes*, all the *études*, most of the *ballades*. There was but one thing that she now never touched—the *Berceuse*. For she had made a divinity of the melancholy Pole; and, since her baby was in his heaven, she would not mar the exquisite cradle-song by any imperfect rendering that might offend the ears of both the dead.

Time floated imperceptibly through the melodious room; and Virginia, entirely unsuspecting the impending event, heard nothing till Charles' voice called from the hall, outside:

“Virginia! Are you upstairs?—Luncheon!”

She broke off, in the middle of the Andante of the *Fantaisie-Impromptu*, and went into the dining-room through the door at the end of the parlor.

“I am here, Charles,” she said, quietly, before noticing that Carson was hurriedly laying a third place, or observing his expression. Then, as she was seating herself, Philip entered from the hall, and his eyes met hers.

Her heart gave one, wild throb. She felt the blood leave her face, and then surge back again. But she sat perfectly still, thankful that she was not on her feet for him to see how she trembled. Utterly, however, as she was surprised, the misery of the past weeks was strong

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upon her. In another minute she was in full control of herself, and was saying, quite naturally, quite coldly:

"How do you do? Charles had not told me to expect a guest, or the table would have been ready."

He bowed very low, but did not speak. He had prepared himself for this manner; yet now that she used it to him—him, who had never felt himself more her lover than at this moment—he was considerably unnerved. There was no more time even for a look. Charles entered, swiftly, nodded to his wife, and sat down, as Carson served the bouillon.

The luncheon that followed, however trying, was successful from three points of view. Whatever Philip's state of mind, whatever the wild tumult of anger and delight raging in Virginia's brain, Charles, search as he would, could find nothing in the face, voice or words of either that betrayed any emotion. Philip was in his most formally talkative mood. Virginia scarcely spoke, and never once turned her eyes in Philip's direction. Charles, considering everything, was in excellent spirits, and had up a bottle of choice Sauterne in which to drink the health of Captain Atkinson.

In half an hour it was all over. The men were putting on their light overcoats in the hall, Virginia, in spite of herself, standing nearby, wondering, hoping, fearing, waiting for the remark which presently came from Charles.

"Virginia, we can put Philip up over Sunday, can't we?—Expect him, then. And, by the way, I'm going to drive 'Lightning' in the sulky to Hilton this afternoon.

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Don't hold dinner if I should be a minute late. The filly may not do the distance quite as Meteor can, yet."

A look—a quick, involuntary look born of old, intimate habit, passed between Philip and Virginia. Virginia knew, infinitely well, all that it meant: "Charles away. I will come home for tea. Confidences." But her own glance had been fleeting and had promised nothing. Philip, following Van Studdiford into the chilly day, could not decide within himself whether, after the intervening hours of consideration, she would yield to him or not.

Virginia herself, indeed, knew no more than Philip what she should do, eventually. Left alone, she retreated to her room in a state of mental chaos. Very shortly Lucy appeared, even more eager than her mistress to revolve the sudden events of the day. But while Lucy, with all the unsubtle openness of the under-bred, was frankly desirous of a renewal of the old situation, Virginia, for a long time, would not admit that such a thing was a possibility. All the overpowering bitterness of the last weeks rose up in her and fought, blindly, against those forces newly marshalled on Philip's side: "An explanation—adequate excuse—his convalescence—Charles' anger to be successfully overcome."—Knock! Knock! Knock! Then, from Lucy also, subtlest suggestions. "Mr. Philip is back at work, you see. Maybe it has taken all this time to do that. Maybe he didn't dare to write for fear of spoiling his plan. Mr. Van Studdiford watched very closely."

By the time four o'clock arrived, Virginia knew just

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how much she yearned to yield to these temptations. She *wanted*, now, to believe in Philip. All her past with him cried out for surrender. And the fact that he was actually here, in Charles' employ, a thing which she had not believed could be done again,—what stronger proof of real fidelity could she demand?

It was Virginia's custom, at this hour, to bathe, dress, and have tea in her boudoir. Mechanically she went through the first two processes, hesitated for fifteen minutes over the third, and then commanded Lucy to serve the tea to her alone, as usual.

While she sat at the window of the pretty little room, making a poor pretense at drinking from an unsteady cup that never grew emptier, Philip drove up to the house, his suit-case in the phaeton. She heard the bell, the opening and shutting of the doors, and then—silence. She ceased, now, making even her pretense, and sat motionless—listening, listening, for some sound: for the sound of his steps in Lucy's room. Oh, why, after six months of waiting, must she still, forever, listen!

But the six months were gone. She was no longer to wait in vain. Philip, still expert, realized that the situation must be taken in hand forcibly. And, with his customary surety, always correctly judged, he did exactly what another man would not have done. Virginia, unconsciously hoping a preposterous thing, found her expectation fulfilled. As she listened, that which she listened for became audible. There were soft steps in Lucy's room. The boudoir door opened, softly. Philip entered.

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Virginia sprang to her feet, and faced him. "How dare you!" she said, in a peculiarly low, angry tone.

He answered her look, tentatively, till she had come a little under his spell. Then he said, almost in a whisper: "After all these months—how dared I not?"

She was conquered. After all her suffering, all her wild vows of unforgiveness, at the first look, the first word, the wretchedness of the past faded away. Every unhappy feeling was lost in him: in his lips, that spoke caresses; in his eyes, that shone with genuine love, a genuine passion for her whom he had so neglected. She would no longer try to understand him. She would only go to him and, in his arms, find Lethe.

"When did you come, Philip? Only this morning?" she asked, ten minutes later.

"I have been living for a week at the hotel.—I didn't dare send you word. Charles doesn't trust me much."

"Oh!—Charles doesn't trust us at all!—Look!"

"By Jove!"

Up the road, drawn by his well-named colt, came Charles, in the sulky.

"He left the factory when I did," observed Philip, softly.

"He's turning into the yard. Go, Philip!—quick!—through Lucy's room down to the library—somewhere!"

He lingered only for an instant. "Later?" he asked, softly.

"If—if it is possible.—Oh, yes,—if we can.—But, oh! we must be careful!"

He flashed a smile at her, kissed her hand, was gone.

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Virginia sank back upon her little sofa, pressed both hands to her temples, and tried to think. But thinking was useless. She might ask herself, over and over again, what she had done. The answer that leaped into her heart was always an answer of joy: of ecstatic joy. And, when, presently, Lucy entered, terrified, to warn her reckless twain, she found there only one of them, alone on the couch, hysterically weeping away all the accumulated distrust and unhappiness of the last, loneliest days.

Meantime Philip, unseen by anyone, had gained the smoking-room. He had thrown himself on the well-worn couch, lighted a cigarette, and picked up a book, which, however, he made no pretense at reading. He was in a state of exhilaration untempered, as yet, by any reflection concerning Charles' behavior. He had, however, taken scarcely ten puffs at his Egyptian when he heard the side door open, and someone enter the hall. Evidently Van Studdiford had taken Lightning round to the stables himself. That, Atkinson reflected, had been a fatal mistake—if he had thought to make any discoveries. As it happened, no groom had been at hand, and the thing had been a necessity. Atkinson heard his cousin puttering about the hall removing his things, and he called out:

“That you, Charles?”

Instantly Charles appeared on the smoking-room threshold, the expression on his face betraying unquestionable relief.

“When d’you get home?” he inquired.

Philip rose, lazily. He was a little disconcerted, for all at once he felt himself extremely caddish. “Ten or

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fifteen minutes ago," he answered. "You cut your drive short, didn't you?"

"Had to. Idiots put an old harness and reins on Lightning, and I didn't dare let her out. The lines are fairly rotten, in places.—Where's Virginia?"

The proper answer rose to Philip's lips, but he balked at the direct lie. "Upstairs, I imagine.—Really, I don't know," said he.

Charles looked at him, closely, reddened a little at the apparent folly of his suspicions, and was satisfied.

Very soon afterwards Virginia came down, in dinner dress; and, thereafter, the hours passed by in the old, accustomed way. Charles, however, did not now retire to the library immediately after dinner; but sat about, uncomfortably, longing to get to his work, yet still too much tortured by half-repudiated doubts to efface himself comfortably, as of old. There had been nothing, absolutely nothing, to suspect. He had spoiled his afternoon, shortened his drive, to no purpose. He had kept Philip at the "Gloucester House" for five days. He was making himself miserable now, because Virginia, in plain sight, was at the piano, and Philip stood nearby, watching her, speaking, now and then, words rendered inaudible by the music. Surely, surely, if his doubts were justified, they would not, could not, behave as naturally as this before him?—How regal Virginia had grown, of late! In the recent months that they had spent together, Charles had never noticed her as he noticed her to-night; never admired her as he admired her now.—And, alas! long as Charles had known Philip's incapabilities in business,

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he had never for a moment suspected his positive genius in his real profession, that which he was practicing now. And, as he made his slow deductions, he could not have realized that each calculation must be wrong because he was an hundred-fold underrating the abilities of the man against whom his wits were pitted.

Philip, from his vantage-point at the end of the room, studied not only Virginia but his cousin as well; and few of Charles' thoughts went unread by him. After a fashion invented long ago, he talked to Virginia under the safe cover of her music.

"Charles is watching us very closely," he observed, in the first measures of the Third Ballade.

"Why?"

"He is still very doubtful of us both.—I don't know—that to-night—would be at all safe."

Now it is very nearly impossible to play anything as difficult as that Ballade and talk at the same time. Virginia hesitated for a moment, and then uttered the one word: "Please!"

No eloquence could have suggested a more effective appeal. He smiled, slightly, into her eyes. Then, looking toward Van Studdiford, said, very softly: "It will have to be late, then.—Perhaps about three.—He must sleep sometime."

She could make no reply in words. Her face answered for her. Then, while her fingers rushed on to the climax of the piece, he strolled nonchalantly away toward his cousin, lighted a fresh cigarette, and seated himself near Van Studdiford with a question concerning the present

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price of pig-iron. And this Charles answered with alacrity, as being something that he fully understood.

Thus, in simplest fashion, after half-a-dozen words on either side, the old situation was renewed ; and happiness, the bitter, mistaken, half-happiness of ignorant, unprotected youth, returned for a brief season to Virginia. It meant much, ah, so much, to her, to know Atkinson still her own. Yet there were details in the present situation that differed from the old. Careful as they were, lucky as they were, there was something in the atmosphere that surrounded these two which bred vague shadows of doubt and suspicion in Van Studdiford. He watched, pondered, reasoned with himself. He saw nothing, he heard nothing ; yet he constantly set aside the evidence of his senses. It was impossible not to see that Atkinson was working well : that he was doing all that could be demanded of him ; even a little more. And yet—there was something unnatural in that. When, on the eleventh day of November, the first volunteers were honorably discharged from service, Charles was surprised at his own chagrin. It was preposterous that he could still have hoped something from that dead war ; yet his secret disappointment told him that he had.

Nor, in spite of the fact that he could not have asked for more than was granted him, was Philip thoroughly happy. He was discovering that, despite his familiarity with her, Passion had many moods till now unguessed by him. The reason for this was obvious. Until he knew Virginia, he had never loved. And, however he had

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begun with her, love her now he did, to all the depth and breadth and height of his not too large soul. A thousand times, through November, he wondered what evil spirit had kept him from her for so many weeks after his return. His vanity was forgotten. His selfishness was nearly discarded. Twenty times a day he was irked and angered by the thought of his old self. And while, in any other case, another man's jealousy would unquestionably have added zest to his game, he was now disgusted with himself because of the discretion he was obliged to use, the dishonor of his risks, and, worst of all, the possibility that Virginia, still tranquilly blind, would begin to see their position in its truly shocking light.

Philip wanted Virginia for himself. He longed, sincerely, for the right to hold her and protect her honestly. Many times he told her this, with husky voice and unchosen words. Many times they discussed the possibility of an elopement. But their situation was such as to make that idea the merest chimera. Virginia had not one penny of her own. Atkinson was entirely dependent on Charles for a salary out of which he had never managed to save anything. Everywhere Charles! In everything his hand! Without money they certainly could not live. And fortunes, in America, are not now to be made in a day. Nor was Virginia of the women who can stand the stress of labor and constant economy. Thus, after each futile threshing of the worn subject, they laid it aside, sighing, and turned to each other's arms for a comfort sorely needed.

The existing situation was, however, only a temporary

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thing, so mutable that changes were visible in it from day to day. Every hour, almost, brought some new discomfort home to the three members of the isolated household. There was, indeed, no one thing more of a detriment to harmonious existence than this very isolation. Long before, during the previous winter, indeed, Virginia, rather than face coldness, comment, or prying curiosity, had entirely withdrawn herself from Grangeford society. At the time, this had passed unobserved by Charles. He had all the American man's scornful disregard of social relationships. But by now he had come to feel that there must be something wrong with a wife who never had any engagements, upon whom women never called, who had not even seen her closest girlhood friend in more than half a year. By these facts, and many others less marked, Charles' suspicions were fed; and his mental uneasiness increased till he suddenly determined the thing to be unendurable, and decided to take a questionable step. If Atkinson was desirous simply of working in his employ, for his interests, he could not care where he worked. An interview, at any rate, would probably decide Philip's attitude; and the interview he determined to have.

Thus it happened that, on the morning of the first Sunday in December, soon after breakfast, Charles and Philip shut themselves up together in the library. When, one hour later, Atkinson emerged, his face was rather whiter than usual, and his lips were closely compressed. He went hurriedly to his own room and remained there till dinner was announced. During their talk, he had succeeded, admirably, in hiding his mind from his cousin.

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He had very nearly satisfied Charles of his sincerity. It mattered nothing, now. Wretched as he was, he thought most of another who would be made more wretched still. There was a task before him that he dreaded unspeakably. He must tell Virginia the result of the interview; but, until the hour for the revelation came, she should guess nothing from his manner. He must tell her soon: there was pitifully little time left for the deed. Yet he determined to wait until night should bring them a sure solitude.

Philip's plan, unselfish though it was, was not wholly successful. Sometimes the eyes of love are keener than the eyes of suspicion. Through all Philip's debonair gaiety, and the clever nonsense with which he entertained Charles at dinner, Virginia caught more than one glimpse of pain beneath the manner. But how sharp that pain was, only Philip himself, writhing under it, could understand.

It was nearly five o'clock and the lights were up before the two came together, alone, in the smoking-room. Then Virginia, who had spent the whole afternoon in a dreary agony, began, abruptly:

“What is it, Philip? What is the matter with you?”

He smiled, gayly. ““Why do you ask me?”

“Because,” she moved a little nearer to him, and lowered her voice to a whisper, “because what troubles you must trouble me also, must it not?”

He hesitated for an instant, and then, suddenly, all the pretense dropped off him, and he murmured, with lowered head: “Yes, God forgive me!”

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“ Philip!”

“ Don’t ask me any more yet. Wait, darling, wait, I beg of you, till we are safely alone. You know that—nothing is safe here, now.”

Without any further word, she left the room and went upstairs. It needed no explanation to apprise her of Philip’s news. With that divining dread that she carried constantly in her heart, she had perceived, in four of Philip’s words, all that he had to tell. And yet she rejected the conviction, strove to put it from her till she must face it, squarely. For though, thrice before, she had borne that which threatened now, she had been woefully weakened both in pride and in endurance; and in her heart she knew that her darkest hour was at hand.

That night, at half past eleven, only half an hour after the light had been turned out in Charles’ room, Lucy crept softly to Virginia, with a cup of hot broth in one hand, a little night-lamp in the other. Virginia lay upon her bed, clad in a long, lace negligée, her feet covered with white silk stockings and Turkish slippers, her hair dressed as for the day. She made some effort to drink the bouillon, for she had eaten nothing since noon. But the cup, nearly full, was finally set down at her side, while her brown eyes followed Lucy, who was moving softly about the room, putting everything in order.

Virginia’s face was colorless, but her eyes glowed as if with fever. She was heart-sick with dread; and yet she longed, almost, for the removal of what uncertainty there might be. She had not to wait long. On the stroke of midnight, just as Lucy left her, Atkinson, fully dressed

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save for his shoes, came in, the faint light of the lamp casting before him the long, wavering shadow of his slender body. He went at once to where Virginia lay. She, however, rose, suddenly, and they stood face to face, staring hungrily, miserably, into each other's eyes. There was little need for words between them; yet Virginia was driven, by a last remnant of hope, to voice her fear.

" You have not got to go again? " she asked.

Visibly, Philip repressed a groan. " Sacramento, " he said. " All winter, I suppose."

Slowly, with the greatest difficulty, Virginia made her way to the morris chair and sank down in it. There, withdrawn from the range even of the wavering lamp, her delicacy of face and form were exaggerated till one would have thought her almost in a state of emaciation. But now, as she looked up, Philip saw two spots of scarlet flaming in her cheeks, saw the glitter of her eyes, the extreme whiteness of all the rest of her skin, and was startled at the effect. He was still staring at her, uncomfortably, when she spoke, in a low, unemotional voice:

" Philip, I cannot bear this. He is asking too much now. He is driving me to— Don't you see, don't you know, Philip, that I can't bear any more of this solitude, this frightful loneliness? "

Falling on his knees before her chair, he took her two slender hands into one of his, laying the other against her burning cheek. " My darling,"—his heart, his tears, were in that low voice—" what shall I do? What *can* I do? God in heaven, Virginia, what a hideous cad I have been—and am! "

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Withdrawing her hands from his clasp, she laid one softly upon his mouth, and with the other she stroked the short, curling locks that now covered his head more irrepressibly than of old. And, through this little act of tenderness, all at once tears began to fall from her eyes: hot tears, that had no balm in them.

"Philip, isn't it possible—in any way—for us to go away together?—*Can't we?*?—*Couldn't we really?*?—I should ask so little!"

He spoke no word; but his head drooped till it touched her knee. What other answer did she need? So they were very still, for five, for ten, long minutes, till, suddenly, Virginia, pushing him gently away from her, sprang up, and began to pace rapidly up and down the room, her restless fingers at work upon her handkerchief, she herself talking softly, wildly:

"Then—then I must go to him and tell him how I hate—how I *loathe* him! I must go myself. When I have told him everything, he cannot try to keep me here. Perhaps he might give me a little money, a few dollars a month, enough to live on, somewhere, in one room. But I cannot bear being alone again here. I cannot! I should die—or go mad. Oh, you don't know what it is! You can't guess. You can't dream!—I tell you, I shall surely lose my mind if I have to bear it even for a week more. I shall kill myself rather than that! I shall shoot myself, or take arsenic, or—"

By degrees her voice had been rising; for she was past any fear of discovery. Indeed, at that moment, had Charles appeared upon the threshold of her door, it would

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

have seemed to her a positive relief, for it would have meant that here and now, at last, something would be decided, the question in some way settled. But Philip, at any rate, was in no state of hysteria. He exerted all the power of his will to soothe her; and, after a long time, she began to cry, naturally, as a little child cries after a great fright, when its Mother has at last reached and begun to soothe it. Philip was quite as tender with her as a woman could have been; and, to all her tears and kisses and little, reminiscent sobs, he replied with gentlest caressings. She spoke only on one subject, but this over and over again, as if she must persuade herself of the necessity of such a course.

"Since you want it, Philip, I will try. Yes, I will try to bear it for a while. But, if it is too hard, if I cannot endure it, I must send for you. And if I send, you will know; and you will come, won't you, Philip? You will come?"

"Yes, my darling, I will come."

"I will stay here, behind, and try. But oh! If I telegraph, you will not fail to come. You will not fail me, Philip?"

"Beloved, no!"

"Promise me!"

"I swear it, Virginia."

Thus, by slow degrees, after the greatest patience on Philip's part, and many returns to despair on hers, the anodyne of love began to act. Sleep, which sometimes comes, in spite of us, at the most sleepless times, over-powered her. And her lover, loving her never so pas-

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*THE FIRE OF SPRING*

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sionately, regretting her never so powerfully, needing her never so cruelly as now, left her to her merciful unconsciousness, and, with a rebellion in his heart the bitterness of which was scarcely endurable, ascended to a sleepless, perhaps penitential, bed.

## CHAPTER XIII

It was now nearly three years since the Merrill house on Michigan Avenue had first been rented to the Kansas City parvenues who still occupied it. Of those three years John Merrill (now, alas! a man in name only) and his devoted wife had spent scarcely more than three months in Chicago. In the latter part of November, however, in this year of '98, the sick man, through the last remnant of his personality, and the woman, with all the passionate force of her intense nature, were overcome at the same moment by an overpowering desire for "home"; the home that dirty Chicago always seems to every one of her children. Thus it happened that, in the first week of December, there appeared, in the society columns of the various papers, an announcement to the effect that Mr. and Mrs. John Merrill had returned from a protracted tour, and had taken a suite of rooms at the Hotel Metropole for the season.

One thing more was necessary to complete Mrs. Merrill's little period of happiness; and this she promptly secured. Two or three letters passed between Chicago and Grangeford; and finally, on Thursday, the fourteenth day of the holiday month, Mrs. Van Studdiford, attended by her maid, joined her Mother at the hotel. She had

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Charles' permission to stay for a week. In her own heart she had no intention of going back while her Mother remained in the city, though she should have to sell her pearls to pay for the necessities of her life.

For the first three days just the delight of being together and the manifest improvement in the invalid brought about by the mere sight of Virginia, sufficed for happiness, and obscured every other sensation on the part of Mother and Daughter. Then, gradually and subtly, there came a change. It seemed to Virginia as if she were being constantly searched by her Mother's eyes; and Mrs. Merrill had the sense that Virginia no longer met her glance: that her child's face was turned from her, always.

Moreover, Virginia was not looking well. She was very thin, whiter than of old, and there was, in her face, the drawn look that belongs rather to forty than to twenty-one. Mrs. Merrill was tenderly solicitous about Virginia's health: hoped, at first, in her secret heart, that there might be joyous cause for it; but was soon disillusioned of that. She asked a few questions about Charles, who seemed to entertain no idea of coming to see his wife while she was in Chicago, and found her questions always promptly answered, but never, apparently, enlarged upon. She gained no information about the habitual life of the couple at home or abroad. Yes—Marion Hunt was well—Virginia believed. They had not met very recently. No. She had given no dinners this season. Grangeford clung to the traditional supper; and—nobody in Grangeford talked well enough to make

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a dinner desirable. Yes, all the good people whom her Mother had met were still there. There had been no deaths and no marriages. There had not even been many parties, this year; and to the few that had been given, Virginia had not cared to go. Nor did she drive very often with Charles.—Well, for the reason that trotters must always be taken out in a sulky; and a sulky was scarcely built for two people, especially if one of them was a woman. Then, lastly,—Mr. Atkinson was not in Grangeford. He was, she believed, in the West, in Sacramento, at the branch house there.

Virginia had grown desperately uncomfortable by the time this point was reached. She answered the last question bravely, and yet there was something special in the reply: something so much more subtly avertive than in the rest of her answers that it sent Mrs. Merrill's heart plunging downward. By day the Mother's eyes followed her daughter, wondering, hoping, despairing; and by night they stared into the darkness, asking a question of the infinite: a question which, at its proper time, had gone unasked. And it concerned the wisdom of mercenary marriages.

When one week of this unhappy fencing had passed, Mrs. Merrill, deciding it to be worse than useless, managed, by her tact and self-possession, to put a stop to it. Charles was now counting upon his wife's return to Grangeford; but he waited in vain for a message designating the day of her arrival. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Merrill was not aware that Virginia had been given so short a leave of absence, and she and her daugh-

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ter were just beginning to yield themselves up to a host of people who had discovered the Merrills' presence in the city, and were welcoming an old and valued member of their exclusive set with outstretched arms, delighted anew when they discovered their opportunity of also making the acquaintance of Mrs. Van Studdiford, "the young wife of the millionaire."

Chicago was now at its gayest, and even Lucy Markle was rejoicing in the opportunity of at last displaying her true merit. Through her skill, Virginia, thin and pale though she was, found herself creating a little situation in that cream of society to which her Mother was so happy to introduce her. And here Mrs. Merrill found a satisfaction that recompensed her for much anxiety. Among these critical people whom she had never known, Virginia bore herself admirably. She was as oblivious of the masculine admiration she excited as she was impervious to flattery and that species of rank toadyism that always flourishes upon the edge of society, and hangs especially upon the reputedly wealthy. It was evident from the first that young Mrs. Van Studdiford was eligible to admittance to the very holy of holies; for she could be trusted never to carry with her any of those undesirable connections so frequently tolerated simply through personal vanity.

Nevertheless, during the short time that she was in the city, Virginia did, deliberately, make and cultivate one friendship which her Mother regarded in silence, but on which less careful persons did not hesitate to comment unfavorably. For, though the object of that friendship

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had, up to within a year or two, been the very much petted darling of enviable people, she had, of recent months, through some malice, envy, or dislike, been set completely aside by her former intimates, who now looked her coldly in the face, and forgot to bow.

Georgiana Dupré cared extremely little for the slights of people who had long since ceased to interest her. Had she wished to exert herself in the least, she could probably have brought round her any circle she chose. For her fascination, felt by men and women alike, was almost irresistible. During the first week of Virginia's stay at the Metropole Mme. Dupré called upon her, and an old attraction that had sprung up between them at the time of the luncheon at Grangeford, was renewed. From that day Georgiana, who had strongly desired to know Mrs. Van Studdiford on Philip's account, determined to cultivate her assiduously on her own. The romantic curiosity roused in her by the infatuation of her fastidious brother, speedily developed into a strong, personal admiration, and a half-sorrowful affection for the quiet, white-faced young creature whom she remembered as promising so radiant a womanhood.

From the first, Mme. Dupré had desired Virginia's confidence. But, after three long afternoons together, she decided that her wish was hopeless. Extreme reticence, fostered by long and dangerous solitudes, had become Virginia's most marked outward characteristic. No one, formally considering her, could have dreamed how close to the surface volcanic fires lay. Yet it fell to Georgiana to discover this, with unlooked-for suddenness.

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Wednesday, the seventeenth of December, was a typical Chicago winter's day. Over the sleet-swept city hung a pall of smoky clouds. The wind was directly off the Lake: one of those biting winds, never found in dryer climates. The streets, which would be lighted by four in the afternoon, echoed to the *clack-clack-clack* of horses' hoofs, and the roll of carriages; for the season was at its height. Virginia had had rather a lonely morning, and had just finished a solitary luncheon. Her Mother was playing Bridge; her Father, it being one of his bad days, was asleep, and invisible to anyone but his nurse; and she was considering, drearily enough, the possibility of a matinée, when a messenger arrived with a note. Mme. Dupré, confined to her apartment by a cold, requested Mrs. Van Studdiford to come over to tea with her, informally, at four. Virginia, heartily thankful, sent back a cordial acceptance, and called Lucy to come and dress her.

As a matter of fact, Georgiana was suffering less from her slight cold than from a very bad attack of ennui, which the prospect of some sort of scene with Virginia lessened. She was in her most unconventional mood when Mrs. Van Studdiford was announced; and, under the influence of a cordiality which had in it a touch of intimacy, Virginia removed the greater part of her reserve with her cloak and furs.

They seated themselves, immediately, before the tea-table, where a fire was burning under the little plated kettle, and the sandwiches and cakes already placed. Virginia, in the most comfortable of arm-chairs, relaxed, with

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

a deep sigh, and gave herself up to the humor of her hostess, whose living-room bore the stamp of fine taste and a marked personality. It was a singularly comfortable room for a hotel apartment. The dead day had been carefully shut out, and all the light came from three fantastic lamps and a blazing gas-log. Big, masculine chairs stood everywhere, and beside them were innumerable little tables and nests of tables, strewn with a hundred feminine extravagances. The olive walls, nearly hidden under a vast collection of pictures and photographs, would, to a thinker, have provided a pretty accurate history of their owner's life and characteristics ; and, whether these were good or bad, they were, unquestionably, amazingly interesting. Finally, on the mantel-piece, were three photographs, one very large, of Philip ; and it was under the spell of these, and the presence they brought home to her, that Virginia talked when she was in this room.

Mme. Dupré was busy with the hot water and the tea canister, tactfully leaving it to her guest to introduce the subject of conversation. For some minutes, however, Virginia kept a comfortable silence, while she allowed the fascinating atmosphere of her surroundings to steep into her soul. When at last she spoke, it was freely, and on the subject nearest her.

"Have you heard, lately, from your Brother?"

A little shock of surprise ran over Georgiana ; but she did not make the mistake of showing it. "This morning," she said, quietly.

"Ah!—He is well?"

The sister glanced up. Virginia must not be allowed

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to slip back into her formality. "He is very unhappy," she answered, looking frankly at her *vis-à-vis*.

Again Virginia sighed. "You do not think—that he will leave Sacramento, do you?" she asked, faintly.

Mme. Dupré handed her a cup of fragrant tea, and slightly indicated the sandwiches. "I do not know," she replied, gravely, "what Philip will do."

There was silence again. Georgiana carefully poured a thimbleful of rum into her own cup. When she looked up she saw a slow, bright tear sliding, unheeded, down Virginia's cheek.

"Oh, you poor child! You poor little child!—I adore my Brother; but I could almost hate him for the havoc he is making of your life!"

It was out. Georgiana had uttered her inmost thoughts. What would result? What had she done?

Virginia started to her feet, and her cup crashed from her hand. Neither noticed it. "What—what do you mean?—Oh, my God, do you know?—Do you *know*?"

She was back upon the great sofa, Georgiana beside her, and she was crying, easily, softly, as she had not hitherto dared to cry in Chicago, both her hands hidden in a warm, comforting, woman's clasp. After a time the little storm ceased, another cup of tea was poured, and, with Georgiana still close beside her, Virginia began to talk, in snatches, of the tumult of her life.

"I'm so afraid!—Here, in Grangeford, everywhere, I am always afraid. There are his letters. I keep them with me in my own room; and they are locked into your wedding-present—the gold box you gave me, if you re-

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member. I burn the envelopes, and lay the paper very close; but the box is full now; and I have a superstition about the safety of keeping them anywhere else. I know they would be found. I never go out—I scarcely leave my room for half an hour, that I'm not afraid, on going back to it, that I shall find that box empty.—That is one of so many things.—I telegraphed him when I came here. But I have had no letter in five days; and I am almost certain that one went to Grangeford.—Oh, if you knew of the hours I have lain awake over it! Has Charles seen it yet? Would he open it?—

“I beg your pardon, Mme. Dupré! I think I must be mad, to-day. What have I said to you?—What in the world do you think of me?—Do you despise me as I should be despised?”

She had not raised her voice. Rather, it had sunk into a dull, monotonous whisper, that harmonized with her tired eyes and her colorless face. Georgiana Dupré marvelled at the heartache that had gone to produce that tone.

“My dear child, you mustn't let it prey on you. Listen to me. If you have any fear of the letters, and since he writes often, send the old ones, in a sealed package, to me. I give you my honor that that seal shall never be broken while I live; and that, when I die, the letters shall be returned to you. Or, at the first word from you during our lives, I will send them at once. Will this help you at all?”

Virginia impulsively put out her hands. “How good you are! That will help me—infinitely. I will send them

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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to you, to-night, by Lucy.—Oh! how can you bear to speak to me when you know? The people in Grangeford, my oldest friends, will have nothing to do with me.” She trembled, at the remembrance of her isolation.

“ Poor child!—What a curious civilization this is! We are very willing to sell our daughters into marriage; but we refuse them the right to any joy in their slavery—any relaxation from acting!—In Europe, Virginia—Ah, well! If the time comes when you need it, Philip shall stand with you, shall protect you. Be sure of that. He loves you; and he is a gentleman.”

Virginia’s eyes lifted themselves into the far-away. “ He promised me, when he went away,” she whispered, “ that, when I should send for him, he would come.”

“ And shall you send,—soon?”

“ Not unless I am obliged to go back soon to Grangeford. Perhaps not even then. If I can bear it any longer, I will.”

“ Virginia, do you not wish that you and Philip had never seen each other?”

“ No!” The answer came instantly, and the dull eyes were suddenly aflame. “ No!—If it means ruin, if it means death—even to both of us—I shall bless God that I have known him for one hour!”

Ah! Heroic Youth!—Who dares pity thee, or thy fruitless outpourings?

. . . . .

That same night, on her return from the theatre, Virginia took advantage of Mme. Dupré’s offer. Philip’s letters were taken from their hiding-place, and, after a

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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long half-hour of tears and memories, wrapped in a large packet, and thrice sealed. Next morning Lucy took them to the Lexington, where Mme. Dupré received them with a kind of reverence. For many days after their going Virginia felt as one robbed of a great treasure; but there came to her also a kind of relief. She was like a criminal who has destroyed his convicting evidence.

December drew along, and Charles wrote his wife, demanding the date of her return to Grangeford. Her reply put it off, rather peremptorily, till after Christmas. She had, as a matter of fact, little intention of going home then; for a highly important move was pending. But she wished Christmas day to bring Charles to her before any discussion should arise.

The fact was, that Mrs. Merrill, after five weeks of something approaching her old life, had become tired of it again. It was, perhaps, the marked difference between present apparent circumstance and former appearance which made itself too much felt, and was reflected to her from the people she knew, constantly. The John Merrills of 2787 Michigan Avenue were not Mrs. Merrill and her husband of the Hotel Metropole. And the first to understand this, the first to perceive the exact relation between her and her friends (?), was Caroline Merrill. She was far too worldly-wise to demand of her world what it could never contain: a disinterested or sincere affection.

Moreover, and it is, perhaps, scarcely just that this should be a secondary consideration, the atmosphere of the city in which he had lived his disastrous business life, certainly did not agree with John Merrill himself.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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His mental state responded with abnormal rapidity to the influence of remote surroundings, and the wretched climate. Certainly these, in Chicago, are not things desirable for invalids. Indeed, since the beginning of his slow disintegration, the broken man had never been so lost to the semblance of himself as after his brief rally on Virginia's arrival.

For these various reasons Mrs. Merrill, during the days before Christmas, made arrangements to depart again, on the fourth day of the New Year, for Pasadena, in Southern California. And she urged Virginia, with unnecessary earnestness, to gain permission from Charles to go with her parents. Mrs. Merrill was, perforce, frank with her daughter. She could not give an actual invitation to her to go; because there was not money enough for the addition of Virginia alone, much less the invaluable Lucy, on the long railway journey and in the expensive hotel at the end of it. But, since Virginia had left Grangeford for scarcely a day in three years, it did not seem as if Charles could be so selfish as to refuse his wife one month in a warm climate, with her Father and Mother for guardians.

So Mrs. Merrill and her daughter reasoned together, bravely; and all the time each, in her own heart, doubted her logic; and each surmised the doubts of the other. For though Mrs. Merrill was unwilling to attempt to probe the secret of Virginia's unhappiness, she could not be ignorant of its existence; and she remembered the cold eyes, the strong chin, of her son-in-law with almost as much dread as Virginia had of them.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Christmas eve brought both Charles and the opportunity for speech. Late on the evening of the twenty-fourth, it being a Sunday, Mrs. Merrill, Virginia and Van Studdiford found themselves alone, together, in the small sitting-room devoted to the ladies. For some moments the conversation had drooped and showed a strong tendency to die away altogether, when Mrs. Merrill, hurriedly grasping the situation, introduced her topic without any preliminary, and was forced, by Charles' inquiring silence, to continue and finish it before anyone else spoke. When finally she paused, Charles knew the whole plan; and his wife and her Mother sat watching him, tremulously anxious.

For several moments he hesitated, not because he was in any way undecided as to his own course, but because he respected Mrs. Merrill, and sought to find some comprehensible justification for his ungraciousness without suggesting its real reason.

"I am sorry," he began, at last, "that you have made this plan for Virginia, because I should very much like to allow her to go; yet I am—um—selfish—enough, to prefer that she take her journeys with me. I had been planning, lately, to wind up affairs at the factory by Spring, and get away to Europe for some months; and I prefer that, until then, Virginia should stay with me, in Grangeford."

"But, my dear Charles, is it so impossible that Virginia should do both?"

He looked at her for a moment, quizzically. "I am afraid so," said he.

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

Mrs. Merrill's face flushed. She was angry at the curt assurance with which this man decided every question. "I beg you to remember, Charles, that a Mother has some little claim upon a daughter, even though she be married. I think—"

"Mother—stop, please! Nothing can be gained, now. If you should plead for me for a year, you couldn't move him.—I have—got to stay."

Virginia had risen to her feet, and was looking at her Mother with all her hopelessness, anger and distress written in her white face and brilliant eyes. Seeing that face, seeing how much lay in it that her little daughter would have been incapable of three years ago, the Mother's anger was lost in wonder—in something more: in dread, in apprehension. There swept over her, at this moment, a great wave of regret, of remorse that Virginia's marriage should lie at her door. Then, feeling herself unfit for the presence of anyone, she rose, kissed Virginia quietly on the forehead, and, without a glance at her son-in-law, hurriedly left the room.

Once alone with his wife Charles' face changed. Through the short preceding scene it had been as impassive as a mask. Now, as he looked at Virginia, sitting mute and despondent on a sofa against the wall, he suddenly flushed an angry red, and, springing to his feet, began to pace up and down the floor. She sat watching him till, by slow degrees, the wrath in her own heart rose to her lips, and, forgetting all her fear of her husband, she suddenly rose up, crying:

"Why is it that you insist upon keeping me an

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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eternal prisoner in that dreadful country town? *Why can't I go with my Mother to Pasadena?*"

Charles stopped short in his walk, and turned on her: " You ask me why you can't go to California? You ask me why I don't care to have you follow Atkinson to—"

His pause was abrupt, for Virginia, with a white-faced " Oh!" had swept out of the room.

That little scene was the end of hope, for both Mother and daughter. In some fashion Christmas day was gone through with: for Virginia more easily than for her Mother; for the daughter could remember what the last one had been, and wonder, a little more drearily, what the next would bring. Virginia was very disappointed in her gifts this year. No one gave her jewels—which are so readily converted into money. Charles' present was books: a set of Chopin's music, bound in red morocco, with her monogram in gold on each volume; and a fine little set of Jane Austen, whom, by a curious incongruity, he himself liked very much to read. Her Mother gave her some favrile glass; and the various trifles from her acquaintances did not amount to much. Only from Philip came a jewel which would never be sold: a heart, cut from rock crystal, set on a slender chain between two pink pearls—which had lately become her favorite stone.

On the twenty-sixth, Charles went back to Grangeford; and, though Virginia was not with him, he did not go alone. For Charles was a man of men. Discouraged and weary of his matrimonial mistake, he did not now scruple to make arrangements for his comfort in the shape

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## *THE FIRE OF SPRING*

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of a certain little house in Burton Street, five minutes' walk from the factory, in which Muriel Howard decided that, at the rate of a thousand a month, she could make herself comparatively comfortable—until it should be time for Europe.

Virginia, entirely unsuspecting of anything of that sort, though she would probably not have grieved much had she known it, remained in Chicago until the last possible moment. That was, however, only till the third of January. For, on the following day, her Father and Mother were to leave for the West. The separation from her Mother was harder to face than she had thought it would be. When she gave Mrs. Merrill a last kiss it was with a feeling of death in her heart. And Mrs. Merrill's arms clung about her child as tenderly as if she had known all that the direful future held for the daughter who, in her eyes, could never be anything but her little girl. Perhaps she guessed a good deal of the secret bitterness that filled the Grangeford home, where the two-edged sword had hung for so long by its single hair. And the young wife also, as she, with Lucy by her side, drove away through the snowy streets to the station, shivered, from time to time, as if the cold shadow of impending Tragedy had already fallen across her heart.

## CHAPTER XIV

VIRGINIA went back into the old, dreaded existence, and endured it for nearly six weeks without any outward signs of rebellion. During that time her whole life might be summed up in three words: inward struggle, loneliness. It would scarcely be worth while, even if one could, to go into its endless, monotonous detail. Virginia sickened under it, growing more than ever transparently frail, and slender, and languid. There were days when her soul shone fiercely in her eyes: many others when those eyes were dull, and she herself, through all the dreary hours, gave scarce a sign of life. Even Lucy Markle, model of fidelity that she was, became resolute and sulky and unmanageable under the strained dreariness of the huge, empty house. It was with her, as with Virginia, only the thought, the hope, of Atkinson, that kept her for an hour in her place.

Inevitably, as rivers, however long their course, come at last to the sea, or as living things that are caught in that water if left unaided, must finally succumb, there came a day when Virginia knew that inaction was no longer tolerable. She had lived through just the psychological number of solitary hours that lead to desperation. She had fought against temptation till her strength was gone. And now, since help did not come to her, she knew that

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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she must find it for herself. Perhaps not even she, certainly not Charles, dreamed that salvation had lain in that refused journey to Pasadena. There her world would have been different. She would have had occupation; sights, sounds, companionship to take her mind from its constant love-longing. But, with all the stupidity of a jealous man, Charles had seen fit to do just that thing that must bring disaster, believing that there should be sufficient diversion for her in seeing him twice a day at table, and conversing with him over factory topics for an hour each evening. Was it possible that she should bear all his contemplated months of this? Could woman of flesh and blood—and Virginia, however refined, had both—have endured it longer than she? Verily, all things considered, she proved her frailty but tardily, enduring her martyrdom of emptiness till February was more than a third gone.

During the six weeks of his wife's suffering, however, Charles was leading a new and invigorating life. He had retrograded into the habits of bachelor days.—More than this; for now he was actually neglecting his business for that little house in Burton street, in which Muriel Howard vowed that nothing should induce her to remain if he did not give up to her at least six hours out of the twenty-four: a condition not very easy for him to fulfill. But her loneliness Charles understood perfectly. Was she not lonely for *him*? And had she not a magnificent figure, and wonderful yellow hair, and the most meaning blue eyes, together with a mouth of which the red lips were not a whit too full? Truly *here* was a woman! a woman

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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of red blood. Muriel was no frail, Dresden lady, with quiet eyes that looked beyond one, and a delicate mouth that curled too disdainfully for any comfort. On the contrary she was a vigorous person, outspoken, and with strong tastes in the way of fine horses and dry wines that jumped excellently with Van Studdiford's own. Easily, and joyously, she brought out all that was most characteristic in her companion of the moment; and no man, unless he was of effeminate refinement, was ever ill at ease in her presence. With her Charles, since his return from Chicago, had been laughing himself back into a state of content that he had not known in many, many months. Let women turn away their faces at sight of him, and men remonstrate by their very expressions: Charles cared little about his neighbors, and nothing at all for his reputation.

The hours that he now kept were unusual to him. He rarely lunched at home. Muriel's table attracted him far more than that of the house on the hill; and Muriel's personality was so fascinating that he rarely cared to leave her till the afternoon was drawing to a close. Of this his wife, from her cold solitude, guessed nothing. And thereby came about that accident which dilatory Fate, watching a convenient, leisurely moment, had chosen for the climax of her isolated drama.

At a little after four o'clock on the afternoon of Friday, the tenth of November, Charles came out of 42 Burton Street and turned his steps reluctantly toward the factory. As he rounded the corner of Butler Avenue—which, beyond the river, becomes Butler Street—

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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he saw, walking ahead of him, a woman whose back looked strangely familiar. For a moment or two he stared, unable to place it. Not till she turned her head to glance at a passing team did he recognize her as Lucy Markle.—Lucy—abroad at this hour: Lucy, walking rapidly in the direction of the Rock Island station!

Before he had gone a hundred yards further Van Studdiford's mood and trend of thought had changed, absolutely. All his interests were centred in Lucy; and by the time the next corner was reached every dormant suspicion had been roused again in him, and he was not on his way to the factory, but following his wife's maid. She was certainly a good messenger; for she walked straight and rapidly, never looking behind her; and Charles, unskilled as he was at his task, found no difficulty in keeping undiscovered. Arrived at the station, he saw, with a little mental start, that she went straight to the telegraph office. He had not thought of this; and, as he slipped into one of the waiting-rooms, he was thanking his stars for his good-fortune in having seen and followed her. While he waited, his plan, a very simple one, took shape in his mind. He knew the operator, Bradley, well. In fact the man had obtained his position through Van Studdiford; and there would be no difficulty in what he wanted to do, provided his manner were controlled and plausible.

It was less than five minutes after she had gone in when Lucy emerged again from the office, and, still without looking about her, set off in the direction from which she had come.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Five seconds later Charles stood in the spot she had just left and, to his high satisfaction, saw a written telegram lying on the counter, while Bradley, at a little distance, was taking down a message just coming over the wire. Van Studdiford waited till the man turned. Then he spoke, in his most agreeable tone.

"Ah, Bradley, good-day. My wife thinks she has made a mistake in that telegram.—Is this it?—"

"Right there, Mr. Van Studdiford, before you. That's it," he nodded, as Charles drew the yellow paper toward him, and read, slowly:

"Mr. PHILIP ATKINSON,  
"231 Heger St.,  
"Sacramento, California.

"I claim your promise. Come to me immediately. Have written care Mme. Dupré. Wire reply to Lucy.

"V."

For a moment or two Charles remained silent, and, as he leaned upon the counter, the paper blurred before his eyes. Then, as Bradley stared at him, and began to realize that he was transgressing a stringent rule, Charles straightened, and smiled, constrainedly.

"No," said he. "This is all right.—Send it, at once. And—by the way—how soon can we expect a reply?"

Bradley glanced at the clock. "It's about two-thirty there, you see. A message might be here by eight."

"All right. I will call for it about that time. You needn't trouble to send it up."

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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All at once Bradley's face changed. "I beg your pardon, Sir, but—it *was* your wife who sent that message, I suppose?"

Charles laughed:—laughed uncommonly well. "It was my wife's maid who came with it; but it's Mrs. Van Studdiford's message.—That 'V.'"—pointing—"stands for 'Virginia,' you know.—Besides, what on earth should I want of anybody's telegrams?"

"I beg your pardon, Sir. You see—" Bradley's face was clear again, and Van Studdiford cut in, genially:

"You're perfectly right, Bradley. I'd recommend you to Clownry for what you've done.—Just hold that message till eight, if it comes. It'll simply save you the boy; for I've got to be at the factory overtime to-night."

"Very well, sir. Thank you. Good-day."

Charles nodded, a little curtly, and left the office, turning his steps at last toward the factory. But the weight that he carried with him out of that small room would successfully preclude any possibility of work for the next four hours.

By the event and the accident of that afternoon, the relative states of mind of Virginia and her husband were suddenly changed about. Since her return from Chicago Virginia had not spent so light-hearted an evening as that which followed the sending of her telegram. For she had met her crisis and passed it. Her work was done; and now the responsibility lay wholly with Philip, whom she trusted as herself. Hence, in her new relief, she gave little

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heed to Charles' preoccupation during dinner; and, when he left the house at a quarter before eight, in the phaeton, "to go to the factory," she scarcely listened to his careful explanation, exactly like so many that he had made of late, but swiftly retreated to her own rooms, where she and Lucy held a long and joyous consultation before she went to bed and to sleep.

Through the whole night and well into the morning she slept restfully; for there were long arrears of wakeful, anxious hours to be made up. And when, at ten o'clock, she woke, there lay in her heart a feeling of mingled joy and expectancy.

Twenty minutes later, when she had washed away her drowsiness and then crept lazily back to bed, a silk kimono thrown over her night-gown, Lucy appeared with a breakfast-tray, on which, under the plate, lay a yellow envelope addressed to "Lucy Markle." At sight of it, all the blood in Virginia's face rushed to her heart, and then suddenly flew back again, suffusing her cheeks with crimson. Her hand shook as she took up the sealed telegram; and her eyes and Lucy's met, in a look half fearful, half joyous, wholly eager.

"When—did it come?" Virginia asked, in a half-whisper.

"I don't know, Madam. It was lying on the hall table when I went down, this morning, at eight."

"How odd that Carson did not bring it to you when it came!" But she wasted no time in conjecture. In a moment it was open, and Philip's words were before her eyes. She read slowly:

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

“LUCY MARKLE,

“585 James Road,

“Grangeford, Illinois.

“Start East on Sunday. Am writing arrangements.  
Be ready to leave on my arrival. Address Dupré, Chicago.  
P. C. A.”

Once she read it, and twice; and then, suddenly, her eyes filled with tears, and she gave a convulsive sob. “Lucy!” she cried, hysterically, “Lucy, he’s really coming! He is coming to me!—Oh!—why did I wait so long?”

Philip was, indeed, coming to her. He had taken the decisive step instinctively, with all the eagerness in the world, and without five minutes’ consideration of what it actually meant. Care and practicality had been nearly deadened in him by ten weeks of hard work and the exclusive society of Henry Fürst, the man of figures. Virginia’s message was a call from Heaven to him in his dull, expiative purgatory. Should he, then, not answer it, though it but opened for him the doors of the third, the lowest world? The morning of Sunday, February the twelfth, found him in San Francisco; and on the same afternoon he left that lively city by the North-Western limited, which, on Thursday morning, was to land him in Chicago, two hours away from the woman he so recklessly loved. And already, as he raced along, up through the Rockies, there ran, ahead of him, his letter, telling Virginia to expect him, in the old guise, by the old signals, on Thursday night: the night of February the sixteenth.

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Both lovers, absorbed in the one thought of seeing each other again, and in their plans for a union that should thenceforth defy the old laws of separation, cast care to the winds, nor gave a moment's thought to the desperate seriousness of the step they were making. But, by one of the unjust laws of life, the care that should have been theirs had been shifted to the shoulders of two other people, a man and a woman, each very near to one of the reckless twain : Mme. Dupré and Charles Van Studdiford.

Georgiana, on receipt of her Brother's letter announcing his departure for Chicago, sat down with it in her drawing-room, denied herself to everyone, and smoked twenty cigarettes before she could bring herself to the admission that she must not interfere in Philip's drama. She divined the crisis ; she perceived its dangers ; but she perfectly understood that interference from her would not do. At the same time, she guessed that which her mad Brother did not appear to realize : that Van Studdiford was not a man to be trifled with or wronged with impunity. And this, at least, however vainly, she should attempt to impress upon Philip when he arrived.

As a matter of fact, Georgiana Dupré read her cousin as Charles could scarcely have read himself. At this time, however, his inward nature was disclosing itself to him in aspects that amazed him a little. He was startled at the emotions which Virginia, proved faithless, still could rouse in him. He was astonished at the force of the inward rage that had governed him ever since the accidental discovery of the telegram. He was yet more surprised at the instinct for deduction that was disclosing itself within

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him. During the six days that elapsed after the sending of the message, he did many things that he should never have believed himself capable of. He read every letter that came into the house, Philip's included; and he spent long, patient hours in sponging open sealed envelopes and pasting them together again so neatly that the opening would never be surmised. And when at last Thursday morning came, the morning that brought Philip to Chicago, the morning of the night that was to see him in Grangeford, Charles knew far more than his wife of the probable events of the darkness up to a certain point. But beyond that, beyond the moment when his treacherous cousin should meet him, face to face, with all the cards turned up on the table between them, Charles could not go. As he thought the whole situation over, the blood surged through his temples, his heart throbbed, heavily, and he was shaken by the force of his unexpressed passion. Yet, with it all, he could form no definite plan of action. He could not, in cold blood, plan the killing of a man. He must wait, he knew, till the moment brought its inspiration.

During these days, which drew such sinister dreams through her husband's brain, Virginia, the wife, was at work in her rooms, sorting and arranging her clothes, her letters, all the innumerable personal belongings that a pretty woman gathers about her, making ready for that vaguely planned flight which the interview on Thursday night was to mould into definite form. She was so sure of her lover's safety, so entirely unsuspecting of any danger, that a thousand suggestive incidents passed

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before her blind eyes without making any impression on her; though not a move that she or Lucy made escaped her husband's watchfulness. He knew that she was packing clothes. He obtained, and read, and himself mailed, her last letter of directions to Philip. He knew the tune that Atkinson was to whistle as a signal of his waiting in the grounds. On Wednesday night, from the almost closed door of his dark library, he watched Lucy oiling the hinges of the side door. That made his information complete. His manner after that was as placid as that of a detective who sees his way clear to a great coup.

So Thursday dawned: the morning of the final day of doubt. And Thursday rose to noon, and declined toward its twilight, with the approach of which three hearts in the house on the hill found themselves throbbing unsteadily in the knowledge of a crisis, imminent, but still shrouded in the grim mask and domino of unrevealed time.

## CHAPTER XV

ON this same afternoon of February sixteenth Madame Dupré was sitting before the flickering gas-log in her living-room, puffing, rather more thoughtfully than daintily, at her cigarette. Her fingers betrayed her state of mind. Mme. Dupré was troubled. She was also waiting. And all her thoughts were of him for whom she waited:—her erratic and dearly loved brother, Philip.

The Viennese clock on her mantel chimed the quarter after three; and before the pretty notes had died away Atkinson appeared through the far doorway, dressed in a suit of tweeds, and carrying over one arm a long, rough overcoat. In his other hand was a cap. These he flung together upon a chair, as he came forward, his eyes fixed on the clock.

"You're ready—so early?" demanded Georgiana, without turning.

"I haven't too much time.—The train leaves at four-thirty," he returned, in a voice the calibre of which she scarcely recognized.

The sister turned and examined him, deliberately. Then she motioned him to a chair close beside her, and offered him a cigarette from her gold chatelaine. "You're nervous!" she observed, brusquely.

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He replied only by a slight shrug of the shoulders. Nevertheless, anyone watching the flame of the match that he held up, would have perceived its tremor. Georgiana saw it, he knew.

"Thank God you are nervous!—as nervous as I am," she began, softly enough not to startle him. "Now I beg of you, plead with you, that you telegraph how impossible it is for you to go. Arrange some rendezvous here, in town. Let her come to you; and, if you actually must carry out your madness, she need not return to Grangeford. But"—she turned to him, and he saw her look with astonishment—"I beg, I pray, Philip, that you will *not* go there to-night!"

"Why not?"

"Because I know, I am sure, I have a strong presentiment, that things will go very badly with you."

"Oh—that is nonsense. You have no sort of reason for thinking so."

"Reason! Do you mean to pretend to me that there is no risk?"

From one of his coat pockets he took a small, beautifully mounted revolver, and weighed it lightly in his hand. "There is a risk—certainly," he replied.

For a few moments only the ticking of the clock and the little whir of the gas-flames were to be heard in the room. But, after a very long pause, Georgiana began again, persistently:

"Charles can, believe me, be a dangerous man when he chooses."

There was no reply.

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"Philip—" she leaned forward, with an air that would have won the world for her from a lover, "will you, for my sake, give up this mad expedition?"

"No, dear," he answered, at once but very quietly. "Mrs. Van Studdiford has sent for me.—There was a promise.—I cannot possibly disregard it."

"You see, I don't ask you to give her up."

Philip rose, impatiently. "I can't discuss this thing, Georgiana, even with you.—There are, though, one or two things that I've got to say. Only—I forbid you to imagine, because I say them, that the danger is imminent, or that I have any idea that it is."

"What are the things?" she asked, turning her chair to face the room, up and down which he was now pacing.

"My papers—her letters—are in the little wooden chest on my bedroom floor.—Here's the key.—Don't, at least, open it before to-morrow afternoon," he added, smiling at her tactlessly.

She took the key in silence, forgiving him the discourtesy of the speech because of the sudden sinking of her heart. She knew that there was not the slightest use in further argument, though a thousand remonstrances, born each of a different fear, suggested themselves to her. There was a little more talk. A few more directions, such as he had not thought of when leaving for Cuba, were given; and then, to the common relief, early tea appeared, and they ate and drank hastily, and rather abstractedly.

At a quarter to four Philip started up and donned his coat and cap. Then he turned to his sister, for good-bye.

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It was over, the kiss that meant so much more than the usual, hurried salute between brother and sister. She had gone with him to the door of the apartment, and had seen him into the elevator. Then she turned back to her empty rooms, threw herself upon a couch, and tried to stifle her thoughts. For the presentiment in her heart told the truth to her. Philip's eyes would never look into hers again.

The last afternoon train that stopped at Grangeford steamed out of the Rock Island station at half past four, with Philip aboard. By a quarter past six it had left him at his destination, and was roaring along through a little gully, past a dangerous crossing two miles south of the town but scarcely three-quarters of a mile from the Van Studdiford house: it being, in fact, the James road which there intersected the track. It was not customary to stop the train at this point, however; and Philip was in town with at least five hours of idleness before him, coupled with the fear that he might be seen and recognized by some of the townspeople. Nor did he even remember this point of the train's road-bed beyond Grangeford.

Night fell, lazily; and, in the Van Studdiford house, the always formal dinner came to an end. It had passed fairly well, to-night; for Virginia and her husband were both keenly on the alert, and talked unconsciously. An outsider, listening, would have been impressed by the flow of polite conversation between this man and woman who had been married nearly four years, and were childless. Nor did either one make any attempt to shorten the

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after-dinner hour. Van Studdiford sat at the drawing-room table, drinking black coffee; and Virginia was at the piano, keeping all thoughts at bay with the most brilliant of Chopin's waltzes. Nevertheless, the hour passed. At nine o'clock Virginia rose and said good-night in a voice that wavered a little, in spite of herself. As she swept slowly out of the room, wondering absurdly if Charles could discern the force of her heartbeats from her back, Van Studdiford sat motionless, staring fixedly after her. When the door had closed, he did not move but gazed into space for a quarter of an hour, till Carson came to remove the coffee, and he found it expedient to go to the library.

Virginia and Lucy were together now, engaged in the dearly-loved preparation that women find so many excuses for making. To-night there were no flowers in the room: no roses, to welcome Philip's coming. The occasion was a serious one, and but the means to an end. It was to be not so much a snatch at happiness as the occasion of planning for a lifetime of lawful and unbroken love. They were to finish, together, their plans for flight.

Nevertheless, when, at a little after ten o'clock, Virginia found herself alone in the darkened room, seated beside the window, to wait, her thoughts were none of them of flight or plans for flight, but all of the man, of her lover, whom she had not seen for nearly twelve endless weeks. Nor was she, even in that thought, perfectly happy. For solitude had preyed on her, had unsteadied her nerves, till she lived in a constant, feverish resentment

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against all things, even Atkinson, who had waited to be summoned to her in her loneliness.

Later, as she leaned forward toward the dark, unshaded window, staring out upon the thin-mooned night, a kind of tranquility, engendered by the immovable peace of Nature, stole upon her. She could see the broad lawn, with its streaks of snow; the scattering orchard of bare-branched trees; even the pale streak of half-frozen river, with its fringe of willows in a shadowy blur. And, over all, arched the faintly-spangled dome, so vast, so infinitely high, and calm! And as she watched, the fever of the day was cooled within her, and she was moved to wonder at the reason for the infinite without, the turmoil here within. It seemed to her, now, as if she could foresee, quite clearly, the final breaking up of the wreck of her married life. At the same time she knew that, placed again at the beginning, had no detail of the circumstance been changed, all would have come about just as before. For to the young, ignorant, over-refined child that she had been as Virginia Merrill, happiness alone with Charles Van Studdiford would have been an impossibility. Now, in the light of bitter knowledge, even to-night, in her overweening passion for another man, Virginia was able to see that, as men went, Charles was not bad: was even very possible: might, perhaps, with her out of the way, make some good woman sincerely happy. And, not strangely, perhaps, this thought was scarcely as welcome to Virginia as it should have been. Self was uppermost with her still.

As she dreamed, here at the window, Time crept on

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faster than she knew.' And she was scarcely chilly, in her lacy gown, when Lucy came in again, whispering that the Master had come upstairs, and was now in his room. Trembling and cold, Virginia crept into bed. There was just one danger now; and, because of the havoc it would bring about, it seemed probable in spite of its unusualness. But the minutes passed, and Charles gave no sign. Finally, at a quarter to eleven, Lucy returned, to say that the last light was out. Charles must be in bed. Fifteen minutes, perhaps half an hour, more, that all might sleep; and then—the signal that should bring Philip to her! Virginia had left her bed again, and, by light of the night lamp, began to rearrange her tea-gown of lace and black velvet, and to smooth her shining bronze hair.

Meantime, always, Charles was in bed.—Ah! Was he? True, he had gone to his room at half past ten, and remained there the length of time that he usually took to undress. He did, at once, take off his shoes, and after that pottered about at his chiffonier, used his brushes, even washed himself. But his final movement was not that of a bed-goer; for, from a drawer in his *escritoire*, he took a silver-mounted pistol, which he slipped into his coat pocket.

After this, for five minutes, he sat impatiently, watch in hand, his right foot tapping the floor. The enforced inaction took all of his self-control, all his nerve force, and brought the unstudied tumult of passions within him to a white heat. It was an unspeakable relief when he found, at last, that he had been in the room full twenty minutes, and was free to act. Moving noiselessly in his

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stocking-feet, he turned off his light, and, in another moment, was at the door. This he opened, carefully, and started at the squeak it gave. Inch by inch he pushed it, till there was room to get into the hall and begin his silent progress through the darkness to the stairs, and down. To Charles, unaccustomed to such mode of progression, and clumsy enough at it, the way seemed extremely long. In fact, as he muttered, beneath his breath, he should never have recognized the hall and staircase for his own. But never had he been so keenly alive to their angles as to-night. They were two among the many things besides plows that Van Studdiford had recently begun to observe.

It was perhaps five minutes from the time he left his room before he entered the library, and sank down in the great chair that had grown to fit his body. He gave a long sigh. At the same time, instinctively, his hand sought his vest pocket. It was withdrawn, empty. He must not smoke. He must not have a light: must not even so much as strike a match in a room visible from the lawn. This last thought, however, brought a suggestion also; and he went to the windows, raised one of them a little, and lifted every shade till the blackness within was pervaded by that faint night-light, the difference of which from absolute darkness is so rarely appreciated. After this, Van Studdiford went to the other door of the room, near the side entrance where he had seen Lucy at work. This door he opened wide. Lastly he reseated himself in his chair, knowing that his vigil had now really begun.

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Van Studdiford dared neither smoke nor read. In revenge his thoughts, sharpened by an unusual amount of black coffee and the physical tenseness of extreme anxiety, rushed upon him and carried him by storm. Like Georgiana Dupré in Chicago, like Virginia upstairs, the mighty significance of the situation was borne in upon him for the first time. That repressed rage which had lain in his heart for a week rose higher, and gripped him, till, in the gloom, his face showed purple. His wife—Virginia—that pretty, scornful, indifferent child,—not yet twenty-two years old—she, *she*, waiting, above him, for a man not himself: for Atkinson, his cousin! His, Charles Van Studdiford's wife, unfaithful, actually contemplating elopement? Good God! What had he done to deserve it? Was it comprehensible that such a thing could be? Charles clenched his hands, but knew neither that, nor the fact that his brow was dripping with sweat. Minute by minute his fury expanded, till at last it was quite inarticulate. Virginia—Philip—revenge—the pistol—were mingled inextricably in his chaotic thoughts. He did not notice the faint shadow on the lawn outside, born of a light set on the sill of the room above. But—hark!—through the open crack of his own window came a sound. He heard, distinctly, a thin, clear whistle lifted in the first bars of the chorus from Carmen:

“Tor-he-ador enga-a-arde! Tor-he-ador! Tor-he-ador!”

Instantly he was roused. His thoughts scattered themselves to the winds, and he himself, once more calm and restrained, crept noiselessly into the shadow of the

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fire-place, whence, through the open door, he could see the outside entrance and all that was to happen there. Distinctly, with his sharpened senses, he could hear steps on the veranda, outside. Then these were still; and there was a wait, longer, far longer, to Van Studdiford in the library, than to Philip without. Finally, the faintest gleam of light stole into the hall. It grew brighter and brighter, till it culminated in the appearance of Lucy, trimly dressed, but shoeless, carrying a small lamp. This she set down upon the floor near the library entrance; and the watcher was suddenly in a panic lest some of it should reach and disclose him. But Lucy, secure in her familiar task, never looked around. Noiselessly and deftly she turned the key, unfastened the bolt, and opened the well-oiled door.

Immediately a great gust of chilly air came through, and the lamp-flame wavered. Then Atkinson, well muffled but shivering, nevertheless, from his long wait, entered, hurriedly. There was a low-spoken word of greeting from Lucy, and, hearing it, he suddenly stooped to her, and dropped a kiss upon her check: a kiss that served his purpose infinitely better than the gold that he had not. Then, the maid with a blush, and Philip with his old, habitual, well-satisfied smile, were gone. The light from the lamp they carried grew fainter and died away. Presently Charles was alone again, in the darkness.

He emerged, leisurely, from his hiding-place, and ventured on a luxury, now, in the way of lighting an ornamental candle that stood, in a Tiffany candlestick, on his mantel-piece. With this in his left hand he proceeded

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to the side door, shot the open bolt into place, turned the key in the lock, and, after a second's hesitation, put it into his pocket. Then he took out his pistol, and, setting the candle on the floor, examined it carefully, saw that it was loaded in both barrels, and returned it to its place. It was at this moment that there crept into his pale eyes a gleam such as no man had ever seen in them before. It was the look of one who contemplates murder, in the deep-gripping fury of his outraged manhood.

Acting now quite blindly, on the impulse of the moment, Charles, his candle shaded by his hand, walked across the hall and down the passage leading to the back stairs. At the foot of these he paused. Above him, all was still and dark. Philip had safely reached his goal. Blowing out the wavering flame Charles crept up the steps till he was at the top. And, because he no longer cared whether he made sounds or not, he was as noiseless as Lucy in her lightest movements. On the top step, finally, he sat down; and, with the pistol on his knees, began another period of waiting.

For a long time, more than an hour, he sat there, scarcely thinking, only fostering the subconscious rage that lay deeper than thought. But, by degrees, in spite of himself, the still darkness had its way, and imagination began to paint vivid pictures on the velvet background of the night. He communed with himself, sternly contesting reason. It had been his unconsidered intention to shoot Atkinson down as he came from Virginia's room. That, surely, was his reason for sitting here, pistol on knee? "Certainly," answered his other self. "Atkinson

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must be killed. How better than here?" "Ah! But here, in this hall, there will be a swarm of servants down on you in five seconds." Charles paused, uneasily, and Reason continued: "You will be charged, at least, with manslaughter. It may be justifiable homicide. Yes, any jury would give you that. But the thing will have to be tried. Meantime you, and especially your wife, will be marked for all time. And there are facts in your life that will surely be dragged forth into the light of day as evidence against you. The newspapers—"

The voice of the darkness did not need to finish. Setting his teeth, Van Studdiford rose again and retraced his steps, carefully, to the library. But it was with a sense of injustice that he did so; and more than ever strong in him lay the determination that this night, in spite of appearances, should Philip answer for his work. If the thing ended in open scandal, it must. But, since there was yet time, much time, at his disposal, Charles began to perceive that, with careful thought, a more subtle issue than the one he had intended might be successfully planned. It might be possible to put Philip out of the way and, at the same time, deny the great Press its usual prey. That would, indeed, be a master-stroke worthy of much meditation. And thus, at a quarter past midnight, Van Studdiford found himself at his desk again, sleep quite banished, and thought, summoned by a candle and reckless tobacco, set to work under a sane, relentless direction. From time to time he could distinguish soft footsteps passing and re-passing overhead. And these seemed always to goad him to deeper consideration. At the same time he per-

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ceived, with some faint satisfaction, that for the two upstairs there was also to be no rest to-night.

Charles read well. In Virginia's room there was at first little peace, little joy, after the embraces of greeting. She and Philip both realized that serious facts were to be met and wrestled with. Immediate wishes must be set aside; for their affair had gone on much too far in its present, difficult state. Nothing, now, was permanent with them. Everything must be made so. Yet, after all, one great thing had been accomplished. One week before, they had been separated by two thousand miles. To-night, they were together, and alone. Neither had any suspicion of danger. Neither believed Time to be pressing, save as their own desires for the future made it so.

First, then, came the little supper that had been arranged by Lucy in the boudoir. Of this Philip, at least, stood in real need; for he had had nothing since that hasty tea with his sister at half past three in the afternoon. After two glasses of *haut sauterne* had banished his chill and warmed his blood, he became cheerful, sanguine, and eager for consultation. Minute by minute Virginia gazed at him, impressing his beloved image on her heart, by his presence finally banishing that ghost of lonely melancholy that had for so long haunted her rooms. She, too, as she pretended to eat, became gayer, lighter of heart, than Philip himself had often seen her. And her smiles were so bright, her low laughter so musical, that presently, behold! all the purpose of the meeting was forgotten, and the two sat in Virginia's room without

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thought of time. Then the light burned again, and Virginia unlocked her desk and began to exhibit its contents to Philip. Besides a few letters from her Mother she had gathered together everything of hers, even her wedding pearls, that could possibly be converted into money. As she laid before him this little collection, Philip's face turned grave and cold. There was not much; and only a few things were of real value. But the pearls and three diamond stars, at least, contained perfect stones; and, though Philip hated himself for such a plan, he knew that the rejection of any possible source of money would, in their case, be folly. For, until they had settled down and he could find employment somewhere, they would need every penny that could be obtained. And, in any case, he swore to himself, Virginia's jewels should go only for her own comfort.

Their talk was serious enough now: almost sad. Leaving the desk, they presently found themselves seated on a low couch, their hands clasped, their heads bent very near each other. As they looked and talked, in whispers, Atkinson felt the faint, familiar perfume of Virginia's laces steal to his brain, in slow intoxication. And his nearness, the occasional warmth of his breath on her cheek, brought heavy throbs to Virginia's heart. Both of them believed their self-repression to be perfect; and neither had any idea of the length of time that slipped by in the delicate trivialities that had always played so large a part in the fascination of their feeling for each other.

By slow degrees, their talk left the business of their

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proposed flight and its necessary details, and returned to the old, familiar topic of the misery of separation that each had endured. It was a subject of which they never tired; because it was the strongest emotion either had ever known, and from it each had suffered, keenly, and in the same way. After a time, however, as the night waned and the hour of lowest vitality fell upon them, this topic, too, was dropped, and they fell into incoherences. Virginia knew only that she was in the haven of Philip's arms. Atkinson gave himself up, gladly, to the night. So, at last, there ensued a period of blankness, from which both were startled by a touch on the shoulder, and Lucy's voice whispering anxiously:

“Madam!—Mr. Atkinson! It’s five o’clock!”

They stared at each other, a little wildly, in the light of Lucy’s candle. They had slept!—On this night of nights they had dared to sleep!

Before they had come to themselves again, Lucy, leaving her candle in place of the burnt-out lamp, tactfully crept away; and Philip was alone to watch the grief and pain and dread steal back to Virginia’s eyes.

“Oh! You must go!—And nothing is settled!” she said, pitifully.

“Beloved! I am here for you. I will come every night till it is all arranged.”

“Will you come to-morrow—no—to-night?”

He bowed his head.

“And will it be just the same as this time:—the same signals?”

“Yes.”

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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"But now—it is so late—so early—Ah! You must go!"

He caught her into his arms and held her close through the kiss he gave her. "That till I come again," he whispered. "My beloved, though I should die to-night my soul would be yours and would not rest until yours found it at the last!"

Shivering slightly, she put her hand over the lips that had spoken so to no other woman in his long, lover's life. Catching the hand in his own, he bent to her again. Once more; and then—then he had taken up hat and coat, and was putting them on.

"Are you going back to the city this morning?" she asked.

"Yes. It will be better, dear; for I cannot hide myself in Grangeford. But I will come to you as I did yesterday afternoon, by the four-thirty."

"And now—"

"And now, sweetheart, good-bye."

"No! Oh, no, Philip!" She was in his arms again, and had laid her cheek against his before she could smile, faintly. "Not good-bye, to me. Just—good-morning!"

At this he laughed a little; and they went, arm in arm, to the door of Lucy's room, and there, with a last clasp, a last kiss, a last smile, parted.

Philip, perfectly familiar with his way, and with entire assurance of safety, crept noiselessly through patient Lucy's room, through the passage and down the back stairs. As he proceeded, he began to hum, under his breath, a little tune: his favorite, "*Chantez, Chantez,*

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*ma belle!*" so confident was he, so young, so much a lover. And finally, in the darkness, he reached the side door, his accustomed exit, which he knew had been left open for him. He turned the handle and pulled.—The door was locked!—Ah! It was the bolt. After all, Lucy had pushed it to, from habit or precaution. He shot it back. Now—Again, the door was locked. Philip felt, impatiently, for the key. It was gone. His heart suddenly gave one, violent leap. Then, on the instant, a dozen lights went up in the library behind him, and Philip found himself staring into the pale, cold eyes of his cousin, Charles.

## CHAPTER XVI

FOR one moment—a moment in which Philip lived through all the past, accepted the present, and surmised the future, there was a silence. Then Van Studdiford said, in a low, haggard tone:

“Come in—here.”

Philip obeyed him at once, with what courtesy he could summon to his manner; and, as he crossed the threshold of the library, Van Studdiford shut the door behind him, not loudly, but with soft precision. Then he walked forward into the room, and they found themselves facing each other on opposite sides of the table. There was a brief pause, during which the muscles of both men stiffened. Philip’s fatigue dropped away from him and was forgotten; but, while he stared at his cousin, there was no definite thought in his mind. Subconsciously he prepared himself to meet Charles’ will.

It was Charles who spoke first, breaking silence with three words, spoken hoarsely.

“You—damned coward!”

Philip bent his head for an instant. Then he lifted it again, and answered, quietly: “You lie.”

“Blackguard! How dare you so much as lift your head to me?”

Philip’s lip curled, and the gleam in his eyes was

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dangerous as he rejoined: "I dare many things; as perhaps you know."

Charles' face deepened in ugliness and became evil to look upon. His teeth flashed from under his upper lip, as he said, with a trembling attempt at calm: "Careful—you fool.—I—I am going to kill you."

There was a little, quick whir. Then each man found himself facing a pistol. Philip's had been drawn perhaps a shade the quicker; but it was Philip who first laid his down, and let his eyes meet Charles' more honestly. "Do you want to have murder done here, in the house?"

"It is not murder."

"Possibly not.—But a jury—"

Charles threw his pistol to the table, and for a moment turned away, Atkinson remaining just where he was till his cousin faced round again with a new look on his face.

"See here!—I've not planned and schemed for days, I've not waited in this room for nearly six hours, to stand up opposite you and call you names. It's about a week since I made certain what you are. Since that time I've learned everything:—everything, mind you. You have deliberately dishonored my house, and you've got to answer for it. Where will you fight me?"

Philip shrugged. "What century are we in?" he asked.

"*My century.*"

"Then you'd better decide. If I'm at your service, it's complaisance, please understand. I imagine that I could obtain some species of protection."

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Charles' face grew mottled, white and brick-red, and he glared at the other, savagely. "You miserable—Bah!" He turned away again, sharply, and, for a minute or two, appeared to be thinking again. At last, when Philip's attention was beginning to wane, Charles leaned forward to the table, took up his pistol, and held it in a steady grip.

"Come with me to the barn," said he.

Philip opened his eyes, but said nothing as he preceded Van Studdiford into the hall, where Charles donned coat and hat, and unlocked the side door. Philip had one moment in which to listen, intently, for some slightest sound from above. But none came. Virginia, unconscious still of any danger, was sleeping, soundly, in her bed.

The two men were out, now, in the freezing darkness, making their way to the barn: Philip slightly ahead, Charles preserving the distance between them. Neither one perceived, in the air, the indescribable fragrance of approaching dawn, which even a Northern February cannot freeze away. Once inside the barn, when Charles had lighted the two hanging lamps, Philip looked for a possibility of immediate conflict. But Van Studdiford was in the stalls, and presently led Lightning out, with half her harness on. At this indication, Philip, beginning to understand, wheeled the runabout from under its cover and ran the shafts into the back-straps. Then he fell to work buckling and fastening, till, in three minutes, the conveyance was ready and Lightning, eager to be out, pawing the floor.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Before either had entered the runabout, however, there came a sleepy voice from the stairs that led to the grooms' quarters.

"Who's there?" it cried. "That you, Jim?"

Charles held up a warning finger for Philip not to move. "It's all right, Sefton," said he. "I'm taking Lightning out on some early business. Shall be back in an hour."

"Oh! Very good, Sir!" And the steps creaked as the man, too suddenly roused to wonder at the strangeness of his Master's having work to do at this hour, returned to his bed.

Charles stood now at the sliding door. "Get in," he said, shortly, to Philip; and, as Atkinson obeyed, he rolled the door back, freed the horse from the ceiling rope, and sprang into the runabout, grasping the reins just as Lightning, true to her nature, sprang forward.

It was six o'clock; and the dawn, gray, cold, dreary, was lifting itself above the Eastern horizon. As they sped along the gravel road toward the public way the still house loomed, like a cloud-shadow, through the mist; and Atkinson, looking up at it, shivered, and drew his coat tight round him. In that instant, for the first time, a quick spasm of fear darted through him; and neither reason nor anger would dispel it. He wondered, sadly, if Virginia, above, could hear the horse's feet. Was she alarmed? Alas! Virginia had already passed into the transitional sleep. Atkinson had left her, as he himself now surmised, forever.

They passed into the James Road and turned to the

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

South, sharply. Lightning was excited and Charles had enough to do to keep her in the road and give her a hint of the control he must keep over her. The deadly fatigue of twenty-four hours of sleepless excitement was stealing over Philip again. Once he yawned: not at all from bravado, but out of sheer, overpowering weariness. Dully he watched the sullen sky, which grew no lighter, seeming to reject the day. And dully he wondered how, when they had reached a suitable spot, Charles would keep his horse from running away while they fought their duel. It seemed to him now, however, that nothing really mattered. Virginia was a fair radiance in the background: Georgiana still further in the past. All the present was gray. But the future lay deep-shrouded in Night: a night that seemed to promise him, for a little time, rest and peace.

If Philip had sunk into apathy, Charles had risen to the heights. The flame of his anger was burning clearly, and by it he was working to an end. He had started out with the idea that Philip had surmised: that of finding a suitable grove for an unwitnessed duel. But, by degrees, he began to perceive another possibility, which was dependent entirely upon accident or Providence. Half a mile away the Rock Island tracks crossed the James Road in a very dangerous curve. Along those tracks, the Early Mail was due to run at a few seconds—or minutes, after six o'clock. Further than this Charles did not get. Later, in recalling the events of that hour, his idea was remembered as having been hazily indefinite. It seemed only a premonition: perhaps a kind of fore-ordination. At any rate, no definite plan was made. Six minutes

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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after leaving the barn they were racing down the hill that led to the tracks. The crossing was so dangerous, and so near a large town, that the railroad company, after many injury suits, had erected a signal station there, and there was a switch a hundred yards down the line. Now, as the runabout approached, Charles heard and saw everything as in a dream. There came the near shriek of a locomotive; the hoarse shout and wild wavings of the switchman; then Philip's hands were suddenly on the reins, and his face went deathly white as Charles, in a kind of intoxication of fear, shouted:

"Well, it's fair and square! An equal chance, you see!"

Then—there was a fearful lurch, a shock, and, an instant later, the grinding of brakes on the train.

The man in the signal-house had, from his vantage-point, seen all there was to see in the dreadful grayness: how the man nearest the engine had been tossed thirty feet, to the top of the high, right bank: how Lightning, freed from the broken shafts, had careered madly up the road and disappeared among the trees: how the runabout lay, a little pile of sticks, somewhere under the train: and, lastly, how the other man, knocked to the track, and carried along before the cow-catcher, was now lying, a bloody and mangled heap, in front of the motionless train.

Scarcely three minutes from the second of the tragedy a little knot of men, a fireman, the conductor, two brakemen, and two or three early passengers, had gathered on the track, and were presently led, by the switchman,

## ===== THE FIRE OF SPRING =====

up the bank to the spot where the first man had been thrown.

"If they're either of 'em living, this is him. T'other ain't got no chance in the world," he explained, as the party scrambled up toward the motionless figure. The switchman was the first to reach his side. As the others came up, and halted, and bent over him, there was a sudden exclamation.

"By God! This is Van Studdiford, the big manufacturer!" cried the conductor. The trainmen looked at each other aghast. This would mean an investigation—enormous damages—some discharges, perhaps.

"They were a-comin' like Hell down that there road. Shouldn't wonder if 't 'ad been a runaway. Anyhow, I yelled at 'em, 'n' shouted, 'n' waved, an' they gave no more heed 'n 'sif they'd 'a' been deaf 'n' dumb.—Ye seen me yellin', Hal!—I—"

"Here. We must get him out of this," interrupted the conductor, savagely; for his train was losing ill-afforded time.

A bottle of whiskey was produced, and a good deal of it poured down Charles' throat. Then began an awkward attempt at chafing and slapping, which presently resulted in a groan of pain, as the stunned man opened his eyes.

"What the Devil—Oh!" he said, faintly. "Where's the other man?—Where's Atkinson?"

"He's down yonder, on the track, I guess, Mister," returned the switchman. "I'm jest a-goin' down to him."

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Charles staggered immediately to his feet. "I'll go with you," he said.

"No! No! You just sit still where you are. We'll do what we can."

"Let go of me, you fool! Can't you see my shoulder's broken?—I say I've *got* to get down there.—Here, help me on the left side."

Wondering at his will and his strength, they let him have his way, at once. And presently, a fearful, straggling little group, they surrounded that dreadful heap.

Wonder of wonders! It was still alive. Charles, shuddering, saw an agonized face raised to his, saw Philip's lips moving, and, inspired by pity and a great surge of remorse, he knelt, and tried to smooth the strained brow of the dying man.

"Charles," came the faint, flickering whisper, "Charles—Virginia—is—innocent!"

And with that single moment of heroic perjury, Philip, hanging on it to help him upward, groaned and let his life go out.

Van Studdiford, weak and shaken and suffering, knelt in vain, wildly imploring some sort of forgiveness for the "accident." To the men around him it was natural enough; but, very soon seeing that no human voice could now avail with Atkinson, they drew Van Studdiford on one side, and, while the brakemen covered the body with a coat and lifted it from the track, conductor and engineer held consultation together.

They had broken the shoulder of a millionaire: a man

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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whose freight was of the utmost importance to their road; and they had killed his cousin. It behooved them, therefore, to do something. The Grangeford station was not two miles back; and at this hour the road was perfectly safe. They must, then, back the two of them, living and dead, into the town.

This decision was speedily reported to Van Studdiford, who accepted the favor thankfully. Had he been in condition, he would have started out at once, on foot, after Lightning. But he was suffering greatly from his shoulder. He was bruised all over, and shocked and shaken. And he was literally sick with the thought of what he had done. The horse, therefore, might go where she chose. He climbed slowly aboard the train, lay back in a night chair on his uninjured side, and accepted some more whiskey and a biscuit from the conductor, whom he then questioned as to the probable time of the inquest, and how complicated the proceedings were likely to be, till they ran into the station at Grangeford.

Here the train, after a short wait to report and receive orders, went on again, leaving Charles on the station platform, with his ghastly charge. He was, however, not long alone. Though it was scarcely yet seven o'clock, there were presently half a dozen people at hand eager to do something for the great man of the town; and in fifteen minutes an undertaker's wagon arrived for the body of Philip, and a carriage was placed at the disposal of Charles, which, after giving a few orders to the obsequious undertaker, who had come in person, and asking a few more questions about the inquest, Van Stud-

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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diford was glad enough to make use of to drive him to the house of Doctor Hollis.

Here he was received with consternation by good Mrs. Hollis herself, who was already up, and, a moment or two later, by the Doctor, in a somewhat miscellaneous costume. Much to his disgust, Charles, with the brief preliminary explanation, "I've broken my shoulder," immediately went off into another faint. When he came to, he found himself on the sofa in the Doctor's office, with Jim Hollis bending anxiously over him.

"How the Devil did this thing happen, Van Studdiford? Your whole left side is as black as a hat. Your shoulder's dislocated—or was, rather, and your collar bone's broken. But these won't bother you so much. It's the shock I object to.—What the Devil is it?"

"It's a bad business, Jim.—Have you set the bone yet?"

"No."

"How long'll it take?"

"Well—I don't think you'll need an anæsthetic for that.—Twenty minutes, I should say."

"Then do three things for me first, will you?"

"Certainly."

"Ask your wife to telephone my place to hold breakfast for me till eight-thirty, and to say that I should like Mrs. Van Studdiford to come down, if she will be so good. Then ask Mrs. Hollis to telephone Aronson, my lawyer, to be at the house at 9.15 this morning, sharp. Last, I want a telegram sent off to James Atkinson, 2306 Indiana Avenue, Chicago, to have him out here on the

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

first train he can catch, and to come straight to me. That's highly important."

Hollis had listened attentively to the directions as Van Studdiford ticked them off on his fingers, and had taken down the address given. In ten minutes the three things had been set under way. Mrs. Hollis was at the telephone, the telegram was waiting for the arrival of a messenger, and the Doctor had set to work on his patient's shoulder. Nor, while he deftly performed his task, did Jim Hollis speak. But in his heart he had an overweening curiosity to know the secret of Charles' injury, and, above all, to learn why he should have sent for James Atkinson.

When, at the unusual hour of half past seven o'clock, the telephone in the Van Studdiford house rang, violently, Carson was luckily downstairs and at hand to answer it. From the butler's point of view, the message was highly interesting: a lady to say that, by the Master's orders, breakfast was to be half an hour late, and the Madam to come down to it!—Humph!—So the Master was out of the house.—And Mrs. Van Studdiford was to come to breakfast! It was unheard of! Carson left the telephone full to bursting with news and conjecture, neither of which would he deign to give to any of the under-servants. But he was pleased to communicate it all to the cook, who, while she held back the corn-bread, told it to the two housemaids. And presently in came James, one of the grooms, who could testify from Sefton that the Master had been in the barn between five-thirty and six, had taken Lightning and the runabout, and that

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Sefton believed, but was not certain, that there had been another person with him. Here James' finger went impertinently against his nose, and he winked at Molly, the upper housemaid, till she giggled, hysterically.

"James, we all know that if the Master had anyone with him, it was not a—female," observed Carson, with high dignity.

The butler, indeed, cognizant of much that was now history, surmised, to his own satisfaction, the events of the night up to the time of that unprecedented drive. But concerning that and its result, he was forced to admit to himself that he knew nothing. Nevertheless, he was uneasy. Though he was too loyal to his family to suggest his real ideas in the kitchen, he longed for a confidant. Finally, therefore, as a double solution of his dilemma, he went upstairs and knocked at Lucy Markle's door.

Lucy, a much-privileged person, was subject to none of the servants' hours, but entirely to the caprices of her mistress. Therefore when, at a quarter before eight, Carson found her still in bed, he could make no comment, though his face expressed his disapproval. For ten minutes Lucy, a pretty negligée over her night-gown and her hair in becoming disorder, stood at her door, talking with the butler. The conversation appeared to interest both of them, greatly, for each was reluctant to turn away. It soon became a necessity, however, for Lucy to begin her toilet, that the Master's unusual order might be obeyed. It was, indeed, five minutes to eight before she shut her door and began, rapidly, to dress. It seemed to

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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be a difficult process. Lucy's face had become as white as paper. Her hands were shaking, and her heart palpitated, violently. Her whole being seemed in the clutch of an ungovernable fear: the fear of Charles Van Studdiford, "the Master," and of what he had discovered of the affair of the past night.

It was two or three minutes after eight when she entered the room where her mistress lay in sound, dreamless sleep. After pulling up all the shades, to let in the dull light of the gray day, she went to the bed and stood, for a moment, looking down upon Virginia, noting that, even in repose, the trouble of her mind had left signs of its presence on her features, till the face was no longer very young.

"Madam!" said Lucy, quietly. And again: "Mrs. Van Studdiford!"

Virginia moved, and uttered some sound. "Mrs. Van Studdiford!" repeated the low, clear voice.

The sleeper's eyes opened. "You, Lucy?—What is it? Is it late?"

"Mr. Van Studdiford has telephoned that he wishes you to be at breakfast at half past eight."

Virginia put her hands up to her eyes and rubbed them open. She was overpoweringly sleepy. "Charles—telephoned—Why—" And then Virginia looked up, and saw her own sudden dread reflected in the eyes of her maid. Mechanically she got out of bed. "Where is Mr. Van Studdiford?" she asked, in a low voice.

"We don't know, Madam.—He drove out of the stable, in the runabout, between half past five and six."

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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"Oh!—Alone?"

"Sefton was not sure."

"Between half past five and six.'—Ah!" Suddenly Virginia turned on the girl. "Is that *all* you know?"

"Yes, Madam."

Then began the silent toilet, the half-hour of hope and fear, the first fluctuations between a manufactured confidence and the terror that is so much worse than certainty of the worst. Lucy's fingers worked rapidly; and Virginia recognized in them the speed of apprehension. Whenever she looked into Lucy's face, it was to find mirrored there her own unhappy thoughts. During the twenty minutes of dressing not a word was spoken between mistress and maid. The lips of both were sealed; for the same knowledge, the same ignorance, the same doubt, the same fear, lay in each mind, hid in each heart. And if either began to speak, where should she find pause?

It was twenty-eight minutes after the hour when, the last hook fastened, Lucy stood off, as usual, to survey her lady, and presently to say: "You are finished, Madam."

There was something in those familiar words that suddenly renewed Virginia's hope, and gave her courage and poise. After all—had they not been frightening themselves over nothing but an unusual incident? And, holding this possibility to her heart, she quietly left the room.

But while she was yet on the stairs it rushed upon her again, that unreasoning terror, gripping and shaking her, replacing all reason by fear. It was by the greatest effort, only, that she continued on her way, finally

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## *THE FIRE OF SPRING*

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reaching the dining-room, where she found herself face to face with Van Studdiford: Van Studdiford, her husband: her husband, his big right arm bandaged, his skin mottled with the white and red of emotion; his face drawn and haggard with—was it pain?

At sight of him Virginia stopped short, and, all at once, her senses were stilled, and everything, even fear, was subordinated to a halting question:

“What is the matter with you, Charles?”

## CHAPTER XVII

VAN STUDDIFORD had been standing to receive her; but, now that she had seated herself, he lurched forward, and sank into his chair. He was half drunk; for Hollis had forced enough brandy down him, after the setting of his collar-bone, to make him desire more, which, taken upon an empty stomach, and combined with the pain of his bruised body and hurt shoulder, had roused all the fierce ugliness in his nature. It was a minute or two before he spoke, and Carson was in the room when he answered his wife's question:

"I've broken a collar-bone—damn you!"

Virginia quivered, and, for an instant, her eyes closed. A moment later she opened them, to ask, coldly: "Will you have coffee?"

"No.—Bring me a Scotch and soda, Carson."

Again there was a silence. But through it Virginia's heart sank. Surely—surely, though never before in his life had Charles addressed her like this, all was well with Philip! Charles could not possibly have seen him to-day. It was some unexpected business matter; and the accident had put him into a temper.—Yet—was it possible that any horse in the stables should have got beyond *his* control, drunk or sober?

## THE FIRE OF SPRING

The silence grew more and more oppressive. Carson moved noiselessly about the room, and Van Studdiford ate, steadily, till, in spite of himself, his dizzy exhilaration began to lessen. Virginia waited until curiosity and dread had overcome her repulsion and the slight fear of her husband in his condition. Then she asked, in a voice unnatural from various causes:

"Were you run away with, Charles? Did you have an accident with one of the horses?"

For a moment he stared at her, contemplatively. Then he said, this time without courtesy: "I was in the runabout with Lightning. We made an attempt to stop the Early Mail on the Rock Island by getting in front of it."

"Heavens!"

A fresh pause. Another question lay in Virginia's heart; nay, trembled on her tongue. Why was her husband out at such an hour, in the runabout?—Why?—Why?—Was it, after all, only on business? A dozen times she asked herself these things. But Charles she would not ask, because she dared not hear the answer.

Van Studdiford's thoughts were running along the same line. Momentarily he expected one question from his wife; but he could not decide what his reply would be: truth, or evasion. In causing her to come to the breakfast-table, his first idea had been that his appearance would explain everything. But later another scheme had taken possession of his mind: a thing of infinite detail, but with much to commend it; and he was inclined to adopt this idea at once. Therefore imme-

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diate knowledge on Virginia's part was no longer desirable.

Virginia did not, as he had half feared, necessitate instant decision. The meal progressed and dragged, wearily, till it was finally interrupted by the sound of the bell, followed by Carson's announcement:

"Mr. Aronson, to see Mr. Van Studdiford."

"Show him to the library."

"Yes, sir."

Charles made no immediate move toward rising; but Virginia, who for some time had ceased any pretense of eating, got up at once, thankfully, and her husband followed her. As she turned to leave the dining-room Charles asked, casually:

"You're going to your room?"

"Yes."

Nodding for answer he left her, and went hurriedly to the library, the door of which closed as Virginia proceeded wearily upstairs.

When she entered it, her room was empty; and of this she was glad. Shutting both doors she threw herself upon her chaise longue, and, closing her eyes, tried to think. But logical thinking becomes a difficult matter when the conclusion to be reached from the one train of known circumstances, is again and again repudiated, and the search for some loop-hole of escape recommenced. Virginia would not, could not, believe that Philip and her husband had, that morning, encountered each other; or that the collision and Charles' injuries had any connection with her lover. But she might put away this thought

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every moment of every hour: it never ceased its knock-knock-knock at her mind's door, till the very consciousness of its presence became unbearable.

After a time, however, as she lay wrapped in the deepest quiet, physical exhaustion overcame even her mental distress, and she lapsed, by gentle degrees, into an uneasy sleep. This had lasted but half an hour when, with a deep moan, she forced herself awake from a dream so monstrous, so terrifying, and, at the same time, so formless, that, long after she had come to her senses, she lay shuddering at the intimate memory of it. To remain alone in her room any longer seemed unbearable. She wondered why no one came to make it up. Perhaps, seeing her there asleep, the housemaid had stolen away again. At any rate, she would summon Lucy, her constant refuge; and, rising, she rang the bell.

One, two, five minutes passed, but the bell was not answered. She pushed it again, impatiently. After still another period of waiting, angered by the negligence, she ran to her door and, turning the handle, pushed it, impatiently. For all her force, it did not yield. With a faint cry, she ran to her boudoir, and tried the door leading to Lucy's room. It also was locked. Completely aghast, Virginia sank into a chair near one of the dressing-room windows, and buried her face in her hands.

Again, though the bitter knowledge hidden in her secret heart made the question superfluous, she asked herself, wildly, the meaning of this thing. She, a prisoner! virtually a prisoner, in her own rooms! Surely there could be no adequate reason for this: no reason

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that anybody could know! Charles had no right,  
no—

Suddenly her trend of thought was changed by distinct sounds in Lucy's room. Someone there was moving hurriedly about, the noise of drawers opening and shutting being interspersed by little gasps that sounded very like sobs. For some minutes Virginia listened, intently, but with a puzzled expression. Then, all at once, the light broke upon her. She rose, ran to the intervening door, and, with her mouth at the key-hole, said, softly:

“Lucy!”

There was no reply. After a moment, Virginia repeated, more loudly: “Lucy!”

Then came a sudden cessation of the sounds in the room.

“Lucy! Is that you?”

But no answer followed. Only, after a moment, came the voice of Carson, saying, sternly: “Why have you stopped? Go on with your packing.”

Then, at last, the truth of the utter helplessness of her situation rushed upon Virginia. In the first moment she was filled with a wild desire to beat upon the door and scream out to Lucy to be faithful to her trust. An instant later she knew that, be Lucy never so faithful, speech from her was probably not needed. Moving unconsciously, wrapped as she was in bitterest thought, she recrossed her dressing-room, entered the bedroom, and there, seating herself upon her couch, gave herself up to relentless understanding.

Look at it how she would, something was known.

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How much? What, oh, what, had happened in that early morning, while she slept? What had Charles done? What was he doing?—Aronson was with him: Aronson, the lawyer!—Ah!—Divorce!

A great joy, an overpowering relief, rushed into Virginia's heart. Divorce! Freedom, forever, from the presence, from the very thought, of the husband whom she had betrayed and dishonored, was a hope such as she had scarcely dared to entertain. Before this time she had surmised much of Charles' character, and had read him correctly. She had not hitherto believed that he would agree to that which she longed for at whatever expense of reputation. But now that hope, which crushed again and again, rises forever in one form or another, suddenly appeared and took possession of her in the guise of a possible legal separation.

Wrapped in fresh thoughts, reflecting upon all the sudden possibilities of this new picture of life, one that was not without its shadows, time passed away, morning grew slowly into noon, and Virginia, turned from the front windows of her room, had seen nothing of the departure of Lucy, who, in the back seat of the surrey, with her small trunk at Sefton's knee and her satchel in her lap, was driven away, still weeping, dully, down the road toward the Rock Island station.

Were Charles Van Studdiford indeed meditating divorce, it had been unwise enough thus to antagonize the most valuable of witnesses!

Though Virginia had neither seen nor heard Lucy's actual departure, there was little need of that to assure

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her that the faithful and devoted companion of her tragic romance would not serve her again in Grangeford. The view from the window near which she sat was of the lawn and tennis court, bounded by those woods in which, such a little time before, Philip had stood impatiently awaiting the appearance of the lamp in her room. Every object there gave its own memories to the unhappy woman: memories infinitely dear, though fraught now with terror and dire foreboding. She sat lost in them, bowed by them, till she was startled by the slight click of the key turning in the lock of her door. Rising uncertainly, she hesitated for a moment, and then murmured, softly: "Come in."

She had expected her husband. It was only Carson, who entered, laid a luncheon-tray on her table, and, with a slight bow in her direction, silently withdrew. A moment later came the click again. The jailer had gone. The captive was once more alone in her easy prison. Hunger was the last sensation that Virginia could have felt; but she walked over to the table and looked at the tray with some interest. Evidently the little meal had been carefully prepared; and it was daintily arranged, the tray not crowded, and everything hot. Looking, she suddenly remembered that, during the ordeal of breakfast, she had eaten nothing at all; and she realized now that she was faint for food. Sitting down, therefore, in the spot where she and Philip had eaten so many joyous little suppers, she played with a bit of broiled chicken, drank a cup of fragrant tea, and spoiled the shape of the delicate little custard. And all the time she ate, a sense of wide relief

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was mingled with her grief and bitterness. For never again, she thought, need she look up from her plate to encounter, opposite her, the red face of Charles Van Studdiford.

The meal revived her, unquestionably; and, when it was over, she had already thought of an occupation for the afternoon. Rather, perhaps, the occupation was forced on her; for, weary with useless thinking, the exhaustion resulting from a sleepless night returning to her, she undressed, found her night-gown for herself, crept into the unmade bed, shivered, drew the blankets close, and, in three minutes, was lost in a heavy, dreamless sleep.

It lasted for nearly four hours; and, during that time, there was not a sound in the room. No one came near either it or her. The luncheon tray still stood upon the table. A pale, wintry sunbeam strayed in and away again. The shadows lengthened; and the long, gray day was drifting slowly to its death when Virginia, cruelly refreshed and invigorated, opened her eyes upon the wreck and ruin of her life.

It was an awakening infinitely bitter. Now, at last, she must drain to the dregs her bitter draughts of apprehension, uncertainty, fear. In the morning, her jaded nerves had refused to vibrate to any sensation. Now they performed their work thoroughly, till Virginia, racked and torn, sprang up and began, feverishly, to dress.

Her hands, long unaccustomed to work on her own behalf, performed their task awkwardly enough; but the occupation, in spite of her haste, still gave plenty of

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opportunity for what she wished to escape:—thought. It was not, however, till she was fully dressed, in a plain morning gown, and had dragged the clothes off the bed to let them air, and had once more vainly tried both doors, that she allowed her mind full freedom. Then, however, immediately, she evolved a plan: a plan of which, twenty-four hours before, she would have been entirely incapable; but which now suddenly presented itself to her as the most feasible thing in the world. It depended upon one thing only. Oh, most pitiful! It depended only, and wholly, upon Philip's appearance, that night, according to agreement. And if Philip were able—if Philip were alive—he would surely come to her.—“If Philip were alive!”—Virginia shuddered, and strove to put the dreaded doubt away. Absurd! Childish! Her husband was, at least, no—murderer!— “But the accident? The collision?”—Well, it *was* an accident. Charles had been out in the runabout, on business, alone.

By the eventual banishment of that persistent, inward voice, Virginia accomplished much. She was now free to prepare for the carrying out of her plan; and, without more ado, she set to work. A small satchel, fortunately kept on a shelf in her wardrobe, she filled with her valuables, all her jewels, and her money—a few cents over six dollars. Then, by much cramming, she added a few necessities of the toilet. Finally, she opened Mme. Dupré's golden box and took out a few letters, which she should have burned. But this she could not bring herself to do; and so, in the end, they also went into the satchel.

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Only one more thing now remained to be done; and of the practicality of this she still had doubts. All fairy-tales, stories of adventure, even tales by celebrated novelists, were wont to set their heroes, at one time or another, in a situation whence escape is only possible by means of ropes made of bedding. Think as she would, this seemed to her the only possible issue. She must get down to Philip; and, the doors being locked, the windows presented the sole means of escape. It was full fifteen feet to the ground. Jumping were madness. Nevertheless, unheroine-like, she hesitated at the tearing up of a sheet. And, in that one moment of hesitation, Hope's barricade went suddenly down, and the armies of Fear rushed upon her again. Despairing and helpless, surrendered, at last, unconditionally, to a remorseless foe, she sat huddled in her chair, her head upon her breast, the satchel standing beside her on the little desk.

During the ensuing progress of wretched thoughts Carson came in again with dinner. Ere he departed, bearing the luncheon tray, his eyes had fallen upon the satchel, which fact was duly reported to his Master, who, hearing of it, laughed harshly, but said nothing.

His wife, however, now gave as little thought to that satchel as he did. Indeed, her spirit was completely cowed. While the darkness grew, and a low-moaning wind began to creep round the house-corner and in at the window-cracks, chilling the cheerless room, she still sat, motionless, drooping, not definitely thinking, only, minute by minute, suffering such slow anguish as no one,

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five years before, would have believed Time could have brought her to or made her capable of. Time now was nothing to her. Four endless hours—seven, eight, nine, and ten, struck before she roused herself. But when the change came again, it was complete.

It was ten o'clock, but Virginia did not know it. Charles, the long strain of the inquest over, had been in bed for some time, and had by now dropped into a feverish, painful sleep. The servants, all the wonders of the day talked out, had also retreated to their rooms. Never, in the history of her love, had the place been safer for deception than now. This, though her mind was not in a state for reassurance, she instinctively divined. And, by degrees, as that sense became stronger, little thrills of hope began to creep back through her heart.

Rising, she groped through the darkness to the wall beside her bureau, where there was an electric button. This she turned on. Then, with hurried movements, she drew a box of matches from a drawer, and, her fingers trembling, lighted the little lamp that stood on the table where her untouched dinner lay. This, hands shaking, heart wildly throbbing, she carried to the window-sill. Setting it there, she turned off the light again, and stood in the middle of the room, staring at the lamp—Philip's signal.

After a moment she bethought herself. There was no devoted Lucy to work for her to-night. It was imperatively necessary that she should catch sight of Philip's figure, and, risking speech in the open night, explain to

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him her captivity. In one moment she had slightly raised the window, lest his whistle should escape her, and, pressing her face to the pane, began her vigil.

What a watch it was! And what pitiful watches most women have known! But some there are that are rewarded by his coming. At first, resolutely stilling all her feelings, she set herself simply to her task. It was nearly an hour earlier than the usual time. Certainly it could not be remarkable if Philip were not up here yet.—The night was so very cold!—No doubt he would scarcely appear before eleven. Yet, of course, she must lose no chance.

The minutes ticked along, and Virginia, desperately resolving not to realize their length, felt it triply. Before she ceased the repeated excuses, they had sunk into a mere mechanical performance, and her thoughts were flying beyond them, into the darkened future. Eleven struck; but no Toreador's whistle rose from the black lawn. It was now impossible to conceal, even from herself, that he was late. And, if he were in Grangeford at all, he must have arrived at seven, by the last train. What was there in the town to detain him?

Half past eleven. Virginia, shivering with cold, her heart aching with worse than cold, left the window, and walked once or twice up and down the room, to straighten her cramped limbs and body. In two minutes, however, she was seized with terror lest the whistle be given unheard, and she returned to her place, this time drawing up the morris chair, and leaning forward to listen.

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Twelve o'clock struck, and half past, and one. Still this widowed woman strained her eyes into the impenetrable shadows, mind and body almost numb. A hundred feet away from her lay her legal husband, moaning in a feverish, painful sleep, and pouring forth to the heavy stillness all the story of Atkinson's death. But Virginia, well beyond ear-shot, careless of Charles' injuries, refusing all evidence of day or night, still sat on, waiting, drearily, for the coming of her dead.

By two o'clock she knew, in her own heart, that Philip would not be there that night. "He—must have been—detained—in Chicago." This was the conclusion that she allowed herself. But still her stubborn body refused to move from its place, though she had shut the window when the cold was no longer endurable.

It seems scarcely fair to her that, some time after this, Sleep should not have come to her relief. But, though she even tried for it, she was to taste wretchedness to the full that night; the climax coming with the faint vitality of the morning change, and the despair of the dark hour. At the end, however, when the first dim streak of gray rose in the East, Virginia, with a long, moaning sigh, lay back upon the cushioned chair, and, letting her eyes shut by their own weight, gave herself up to the blessed refuge of the unhappy.

That morning, between eight and ten, the Van Studdiford house seemed to reawake to some interest in its mistress; for, at regular intervals of fifteen minutes, there came a tapping at her bedroom door. When, at ten o'clock, there had still been no sign from the room, the

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person who knocked deemed it expedient to resort to summary measures.

Five minutes later, Virginia opened her eyes. Her sleep had been so dreamless, so absolutely heavy, that, on waking, she was dazed and half stunned; nor was this feeling lessened by the appearance of the person standing before her, whose unfamiliar and unwinking gaze Virginia presently decided must have caused her waking.

"Who—who are you?" she asked, after a moment or two, half doubting her vision.

"I'm Mrs. Smith, Ma'am; and your husband has engaged me to be your companion," replied the person, smiling and smoothing her skirt.

"My companion!"

"Well, Ma'am, Mr. Van Studdiford said to me, s'he, 'My wife needs a maid.'

"'Mr. Van Studdiford,' s'I, 'I'm no lady's maid. Long 's I've known, 'n' honored you'n' your fam'ly, I'm no lady's maid. *But*,' s'I, 'I'll do what I can. I c'n hook up a dress, an' fix a tray, 'n' draw a bath, 'n' darn beautiful. Nevertheless, I'm Jerry Smith's widow, 'n' I ain't goin' to pertend to bein' a maid.'

"Then Mr. Van Studdiford, your husband, s'he, 'That's all right, Mrs. Smith. Whatever you are, my wife needs you to take care of her.' 'N' so, I'm here.—Now, my dear, you jest get off that dress, 'n' wash up a little, 'n' get right into your bed. I'll run down an' get your breakfast in a jiffy.—'N' then you kin rest a little, while I tidy up the room 'n' git my bearings.—Land! What a stack o' truck!" and Mrs. Smith beamed on her bewil-

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dered mistress, with all the expansion of her illiterate, kindly humanity.

For a moment, Virginia gazed in silence at the figure before her: the figure of a woman of forty, whose medium height appeared greatly increased by her gaunt angularity. From the seamed and gentle face, framed in smoothly brushed dark hair, looked out the friendly spirit of one whom the many griefs and trials of a hard life had softened, not embittered. Virginia, who had been drearily regretting Lucy, gazed for a moment into the faded hazel eyes of this most motherly of childless women, and suddenly felt her very heart dissolve in tears.

Never in her life had Virginia cried, or thought to cry, as she cried now. Mrs. Smith, in spite of the common sense that kept her busy with cold water, smelling-salts, and cheering words, was, nevertheless, frightened for a few moments by the violence of the sobs. Whatever she knew of Virginia's story, and whatever her preconceived idea on that subject, Ellen Smith, from the first half-hour of her arrival, took a sudden, overwhelming fancy, born half of pity, half of the Mother-sense of protection, to this white-faced, delicate, sad-eyed woman, who was kept a close prisoner by her husband, and who had sat up all night at the window, in her chair.

Moreover, Virginia, to her own, intensest amazement, found herself, as, by degrees, the wild outburst lessened and grew still, with her head on the shoulder, and her arms round the neck, of Mrs. Smith, who was patting and petting and soothing as her own Mother had never

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been able to do. A little bit later Virginia was in bed, with two pillows, in comfortable angles, at her back, and her hands and face cooler and fresher than Lucy had ever got them. Also, a very few minutes later, she was drinking a cup of coffee, fresh-made, and therefore of a fragrance almost unknown to her; and eating a slice of toast, the crusts of which had not been cut off, but which somehow tasted better and crisper and hotter than toast had ever tasted before. And all the time she ate, Mrs. Smith was moving about the room, not very noiselessly, not at all with Lucy's trained manner. She was, as she explained it, "gittin' her bearings." But to Virginia's eyes the sight of the homely figure brought inexpressible comfort. In her heart she realized that, from this stranger, she had, in the first half hour of their meeting, received a species of affectionate sympathy for which she had been starving all her life.

The day—that day of the eighteenth of February—passed, not like the day before, but almost tranquilly. Nearly all through the morning Virginia slept. But she woke again half an hour before luncheon time, which, a little to Mrs. Smith's chagrin, Carson, with his most unapproachable air, arranged on its tray and gave to "the new maid" merely to carry upstairs.

As it happened, Charles himself had his noon meal in his room on this day. Hollis had called in the morning, found some inflammation in the shoulder, rather a high temperature, and a general soreness and stiffness resulting from the bruised surfaces; and, after an examination, he bade his patient remain in bed till he should

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improve in several ways. To this mandate Charles submitted with fairly good grace; for his mind was full enough to provide him with ample occupation; and, to tell the truth, getting up brought with it the prospect of gossip and curiosity from the townspeople, and this he was willing to put off for as long a time as he conveniently could. It was while he lay here, racked with pain and excited by his fever, that he worked out, detail by detail, his plans for Virginia's future; and when he was still at his luncheon he decided to hold the first interview with her on that same afternoon.

After his meal Van Studdiford dropped his logically conducted examination of problems, and fell into an involuntary musing on matters of which he could scarcely have told the object. They related to his real attitude toward that wife whose nature and temperament he had, up to the week before, never so much as suspected. Van Studdiford's standard of women had never been high. But, because Virginia had been especially unapproachable with him, he had believed her coldly correct and indifferent to all the world. Now that she had revealed herself in this other, passionate light,—which was also an exaggeration of her real character—Charles could not determine whether he felt most bitter because of his disonor, or most chagrined that, as her husband, and one who had genuinely cared for her, he had been unable to find the key to her emotional nature.

This question had by no means been answered to Charles' satisfaction when, with a good deal of assistance from Carson, he prepared to meet the subject of his

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consideration. For half an hour the difficulty of dressing with the bandages on his shoulder and his bruised side, gave him no time for other thoughts. And when he was quite ready, dressing-gown and slippers taking the place of a more ceremonious but impossible toilet, he allowed himself no reflection, but took, from under his pillow, the key to Virginia's room, proceeded down the hall, knocked at her door, and, after a moment's fumbling at the lock with his left hand, opened it.

As he entered, Virginia sprang to her feet. She was alone, fully dressed, and, seeing him, her eyes suddenly lighted with eagerness.

They faced each other; and then, under Charles' inquiring gaze, her expression changed again. The look of animation was replaced by one of stubborn determination, unbeautiful, but not unfamiliar to the man before her.

" May I sit down?" he asked.

" If you want to."

He seated himself in a chair opposite to that from which she had risen, and to which she now returned. There was a short silence. Then Virginia, her chin tilted into the air, observed :

" So the jailer is making a round of his prisoners?—What does he want?"

" He wants to know if you are in every way satisfied—with your prison."

" Do you mean to keep me here?" Her tone changed, suddenly, to one of indignation.

" If necessary."

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"*Necessary!*—Charles, this is—this is—illegal!" she hazarded.

He shrugged one shoulder, and frowned at the pain in the other. "You're my wife. You promised obedience," he returned, in a voice harsh with pain.

"Then I take back that promise, here, in the sight of Heaven!—Oh, Charles, it is all so simple! Sue me for divorce, on whatever grounds you choose. I shall never even attempt a defense. I swear to you that I will never trouble you, that I will never so much as *see* you again. And if you will only let me go, I'll—I'll bless you, as long as I live!"

She stopped, breathless, and Van Studdiford examined her keenly. He could scarcely have believed that she, even in her situation, would wish to ruin herself so absolutely. Evidently she was not yet worldly-wise, and was still unable to take care of herself. Manlike, this thought appealed to him. Well, she should not have to take care of herself. It was he, her husband, who would still protect her, even from her own unwisdom.

"Have you thoroughly considered just what such a divorce as you suggest would mean to you?" he observed, quietly. "Let me lay it before you.

"Should I do as you suggest, and divorce you, there would, as we both know, be but one ground for which I could bring proof. That ground is the most notorious of all. There would, of course, be no alimony from me; and you would be obliged to leave my protection a social outcast, penniless, a burden to your Mother, who certainly has burden enough, and without any possible chance of

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ever regaining your position.—What in the world would you do?"

" You are mistaken in your chief point. I should not add to my Mother's burden; for I should not go to her."

" Ah! You would live alone?"

" I should go to one to whom I could not be a burden; one who is waiting for me, who wants me, has wanted me, for a long, long time."

" And may I ask—who this person is?" requested Van Studdiford, outwardly courteous, though with a little tremor behind his mask. He knew that she must learn the truth without delay; but he was undeniably apprehensive about the result of the revelation.

For only a second or two did Virginia hesitate. Then, though her poor bravado was tremulously near to breaking, she said, clearly: " I go at once to the man I love, to the man who loves me above all other things."

" And this man?"

" Philip Atkinson."

There was a little pause, during which Virginia sat listening to the wild throbbing of her heart. Then Van Studdiford rose, painfully. " You could scarcely go to Philip now, Virginia."

" Wh—why?"

" Because Philip—was in the runabout with me yesterday morning, when we were struck by the early mail.—He was killed."

For a second, her heart was held in a fierce vice. It could not beat, and she gasped with pain. After that she

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sat perfectly still, while a monstrous weight settled down upon her, and a gray mist closed her in from the world. Through this mist she could still see the face of Charles turned toward her, looking at her keenly, with eyes that were not angry, that were scarcely cold.

Bowed by it, she still struggled to lift that weight and rise. Presently she did so, giving Van Studdiford eye for eye.

"Murderer!" she said, softly.

"A coroner's jury yesterday acquitted me of any fault in the accident."

"Mur—der—er," she repeated, still more softly, to herself. Then, suddenly, her voice rose till it became a scream: "Philip! — Philip! — Philip dead! — Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!" and she ran into a wild peal of laughter that presently encountered a sob.

"For God's sake, Virginia, stop it!" cried Charles, his fists clenched.

But no fury or command of man will stop a woman's hysterics. And who could govern Virginia's mind or will? Widowed at heart, stripped of hope, hating her life no more than she hated the man before her, her laughs and sobs grew wilder and fiercer, till Charles realized that she must have help. Nevertheless, before he left the room to get Mrs. Smith, he turned again to his wife, saying, sternly:

"Understand, Virginia, that I shall not divorce you. By the death of Atkinson I have cleared my honor. And you must understand also that he was fairly killed; for I took the same chance as he."

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*THE FIRE OF SPRING*

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Though Virginia never paused in her paroxysms, she nevertheless heard and understood both points in his speech: understood fully the words that took away her last, faint hope of freedom or mistaken happiness with the dead.

## CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN, in response to Van Studdiford's hasty summons, Mrs. Smith reached Virginia's room after that brief, tragic interview, she found her mistress beyond control. The wild medley of heart-broken sobs and screams of laughter was audible in every room in the house; and good Mrs. Smith was undisguisedly distressed and nonplussed at the picture presented by the delicate, slender woman, who, crouched in her great chair, writhed and twisted and shook under the force of her nervous reaction.

Even a long hour later, when the sensible woman had got her charge to bed, bathed her face and hands with cold water, wet her temples with cologne, administered salts freely, and had added to these things the soothing pats and strokes and comfortings of gentle hands and heartfelt pity and sympathy, Virginia still remained a pathetic object. Though she was, by this time, quite still, save for the occasional jerk of a muscle, her face had set into a kind of white deadness, and her eyes, which stared, steadily, at the windows, were expressionless, almost glazed. She lay without sound or movement, save when, from time to time, her whole frame was shaken by a long, involuntary, shuddering sob.

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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Mrs. Smith, however, was no longer so dismayed. She had seen more than one person lie thus, under the stress of great grief: had, indeed, so lain herself, when, six months after the death of her husband, her boy, her one boy, had been taken also, with typhoid, darkening forever all the light of her little world. Watching Virginia, now, Ellen Smith did her best to bring back memories which, hitherto, she had striven daily to put farther from her. But she must know exactly how Virginia felt at this bitter time, that she might, if possible, think of something that would be of use. Try as she would, however, she could remember nothing save that the period immediately following the climax is marked simply by its overpowering sense of emptiness. Virginia, indeed, was not even thinking. Vague processes went on in her mind. She became weakly distressed that she could not, in the least, recall how Atkinson had looked. Beyond this, and a slow groping along the first mile or two of the Way of Despair, she knew and felt nothing. Had she, as would have seemed only reasonable, been in the least prepared for tragic news of her lover, the poignancy of grief might have come at once. But she had clung so abjectly to the last shred of hope, and had put other possibilities out of her head so successfully, that the news of his death was a blow the suddenness of which stunned her, and was to leave her dazed and stupid for a long time to come.

At Virginia's own request Mrs. Smith was her constant companion. The only duty save this attendance that the good lady attempted, was her regular morning

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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report to Van Studdiford, concerning his wife's condition. Trusting, implicitly, to these reports, it was two full weeks before he saw his wife again.

The time was not passed wholly in imprisonment. Virginia was given to understand that there was a vehicle at her disposal every afternoon; and out-door air was recommended. The only condition of the outings was, that Mrs. Smith should always be with her. It was a stipulation that need scarcely have been made; for Virginia, in her deadened condition, never dreamed of escape; and, to keep her mind off itself a little she would, in any case, have demanded her companion's presence. The walks and drives were nearly always extended to the country; for Virginia could not bear the thought of seeing anyone she knew, and enduring the cut which, of course, must be given and taken. So they regularly started Southward, down the James Road, crossing, almost daily, the tracks that had formed the scene of the accident. Strangely enough, however, it never once occurred to Virginia that this could be the spot mentioned by Charles; and Mrs. Smith, whatever she knew or suspected, held her peace.

Besides the outings, which after all, rarely covered more than an hour and a half, there was extremely little that Virginia cared or would try to do. Lucy and her early training had combined to make her indolent; and the energetic nature of her new attendant was confounded twenty times a day by Mrs. Van Studdiford's indifference or positive disinclination to any form of homely work: plain sewing, knitting, dusting the ornaments in

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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her room, washing her brushes or cleaning her silver. All these things but the last, which was now Carson's charge, Mrs. Smith did herself; but Virginia was never interested enough to look on.

As a matter of fact, contrary to the usual theory that work is the one, infallible remedy for grief, it is probable that the performance of such little tasks as Mrs. Smith devised for her would, had she undertaken them, have added to, rather than diminished, Virginia's sorrow. For, in the last two months, ever since the impossibility of life without Philip had become clear to her, Virginia had begun to indulge in bride-like dreams of sweetest poverty, when, for Philip's sake, she should perform, gladly and happily, all the homely duties that she had disclaimed throughout her unhappy marriage. Through her love for Atkinson it might have been easy for her to become a womanly woman. But that high end was now only to be gained by the passage of a longer, rougher road.

Fourteen days had passed since the last scene between Charles and his wife. During that time Van Studdiford had been very busy, and had accomplished a great deal. It now remained only to bring his plan to a head. Fourteen days he had waited, and March had come in and begun its round of blustering storms and sudden hints of Spring, before Virginia gave her first sign of uneasiness, and first manifested a desire to see him. But by Saturday, the fourth of March, Mrs. Smith, closely watching for the sign, perceived that Virginia's eyes had taken on a new brightness, her cheeks a sus-

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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picion of the old color; and she guessed that, for the first time since the tragedy, a thought of herself had entered Virginia's heart.

This shrewd surmise was duly reported to the Master, who spent that night in consideration, arriving, some hours before dawn, at a decision to undertake another interview that morning, the morning of Sunday, the fifth day of Spring. His experience of a fortnight before, however, had not been such as to give Charles any hope of comfort in the forthcoming colloquy. His dread of nervousness and tears was greater even than that of the majority of men; and he went over every possibility of either that could arise from what he had to say, that he might so soften and modify his explanations as to disturb her as little as might be. Not till his reflections were ended, and he had settled himself for a last, late nap before descending to his lonely breakfast, did a certain question come unbidden to his mind: a question tardy, disturbing, and unanswerable. After all, why in the world should he be taking such infinite pains for the future of a faithless wife? Why not act in accordance with her own wish; or, more chivalrously, allow her to obtain a divorce from him on any fanciful ground? Why, Charles Van Studdiford? Why?—Art thou, after all, so much more a man than thy fellows? so much more of a hero than him believed to be such by thy wife: that wife for whom, in thy seared heart, still lurks so unfathomable a tenderness?

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It was eleven o'clock that morning when Virginia,

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just finishing her solitary breakfast, was startled by the appearance of Carson, who came, incidentally, for the tray, and especially to announce to her, in the most formal of tones:

“Mr. Van Studdiford, Madam!”

Virginia, taken by surprise, rose hurriedly as Charles came in. For some seconds neither of them spoke. Carson fumbled with the tray as long as he dared, but was finally obliged to retire without a single word to report below. As soon as he was gone, however, and the door shut, Charles began, quietly:

“There are certain matters that must come up between us; and I have more time, to-day, in which to discuss them than I can count on during the week.—H’m!—Ha!—Shall we sit down?”

Virginia retreated a little, and seated herself in a rocking-chair with her back to the windows of the jut, at the same time indicating the morris chair to her husband. Then, before he had settled himself to speak, she said, quickly:

“Have you reconsidered? Are you, after all, going to free yourself—and me?” And her face took on a sudden light.

“No,” was the reply. The light faded. “You may put every idea of divorce out of your head. You’re my wife; and my wife you must stay. This divorce custom is damned nonsense: worse. Nowadays, every time two people fall out, or get stirred up over some discussion, one of ‘em rushes off to a lawyer who hashes up evidence enough for a decree. And it hasn’t been my observation

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## THE FIRE OF SPRING

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that divorced people are any happier than they were married.—No, Virginia. You shall not ruin your character and my name any further by that means."

At this rough, but not unkindly spoken opinion, and particularly at the last brusque decision, Virginia turned first scarlet and then very white. When she spoke, however, her voice was well under control. "What do you intend, then, to do with me? Am I to stay in this room all the rest of my life?"

"No!" cried Van Studdiford, loudly. Then, leaning forward in his chair, his head bent so that his face was scarcely visible, his finger-tips legally touching, he began to speak, in a voice muffled, and oddly tinged with feeling.

"No. This room belonged to my bride, to my real wife, to the Mother of my little girl.—You cannot stay in it." He raised his eyes and looked at her for a second, and was relieved to find misery in her drawn face. "You are not the woman I married. I tell you, Virginia, little as you cared, you've dealt me a pretty big blow; and, for a few weeks, anyway, I don't care to think of you as in my house.—So I've made other arrangements for you: a temporary thing, probably for the summer only." He looked at her again; but her eyes were cast down, and she was silent. There had been something in Charles' words which for the first time brought home the fact that she had really owed him a duty, and that she had failed in it, shockingly. Now, anxious as she was to learn what hope her immediate future held, she felt that it was not her place to ask.

"Perhaps you remember," he went on, after the little

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pause, "perhaps you remember the cottage on Thompson's farm that we saw on our drive there a couple of years ago?"

"The cottage where—Thompson's Mother used to live?"

"Yes, that one. Well, Virginia, that is being over-hauled for you."

"For me!" Virginia started to her feet.

"For the summer only, in all probability.—Sit down, please.—The cottage, I repeat, is being done over for you."

"But—But—" she stared at him, rather wildly, and then sank into her chair again. "But Charles—the loneliness! Heavens! I shall die in it!"

There was a moment's silence. Then, still contemplating his finger-tips, Charles observed, quietly: "I do not think so.—I shall arrange to have Mrs. Smith and a competent servant go out with you. For this purpose I am putting an 'L' on the cottage, and adding two bathrooms. The living-room, widened a little and decently furnished, won't be bad. And you can have your piano there."

"A piano!—Oh.—So I can practice on a piano, and eat, and sleep.—Mighty privilege!—And that's to be my summer. Well, God knows it's all my life has held since I was married!"

"Charles Van Studdiford, you married me, a child of eighteen, and brought me out to this country village, and buried me alive. There has never been a person here that I cared to speak to, except Marion Hunt. And she

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was soon angry with me because—because she couldn't make Philip propose to her.—Then the baby came, and I was happy. I could have been happy always, and—and good, and content here, if Caroline had lived.—But I was left here all alone to see her die.—My little baby!—And when she was gone, and I was quite alone, who was it that came to comfort me? I needed help as I had never needed it. But you didn't come. My Mother didn't come. It was Philip who came—immediately. From that hour, I think, I loved him.—After that, too, Charles, you were never with me. You worked at the factory day and night. You never thought of me, or paid any attention to me. You just left me shut up in this hideous house, alone, alone, alone, and thought I could *exist* in it!

“ And now, because I came to love, more and more, the one person who did give me some little attention, who seemed to care whether I lived or died: because I came to care for him till life without him was a torment, you kept him always away from me. Then I decided to go away with him. We were going to live our lives together, without hindrance, without this constant deceit that we both hated. For this you are going to keep me an absolute prisoner. You have murdered him for it. Then kill me, too.—Ah, but you have something more terrible in store for me! You want to drive me out of my mind! You are going to make me insane. Then you can truly get rid of me! Then——”

“ Hush! Stop it, Virginia! This is damned nonsense. You've never been ill-treated since your marriage, nor left alone. There are plenty of people worth knowing

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and liking in Grangeford ; and you could have had all the society and all the friends you liked if you had ever shown any desire for them. But your behavior has been such that these clean country people haven't wanted to know you.—You chose your path for yourself. Don't complain about it now.

" In ten days the farm cottage should be ready for you ; for I've had eight or ten men at work on it for some time. One week from Wednesday, the fifteenth of March that is, you will be driven out there ; and I'll send out any trunks or luggage that you like. Mrs. Smith, who goes with you, has heard your whole story. I've known her and her husband for years, and she is absolutely trustworthy. But the cook, and Thompson and his family, know nothing unless you, in your folly, betray yourself to them when you're there."

During this speech Virginia's face had been buried in her hands, and Charles had not caught a glimpse of it. Now she asked, in a choked voice : " You say that this is only for the summer ? "

" Yes.—And it is possible that, next winter, we shall both of us be in a different frame of mind." He rose to his feet, and took a dozen quick strides across the room and back. Then, pausing, he looked down at her with rather an unreadable expression. " Virginia," he said, " you're my wife, and my wife you shall stay.—When we are over this—Bah ! " He could not finish the thought he had begun, for as yet he was in no wise sure of himself.

Virginia now lifted her head ; even rose, wearily ; and Charles frowned as he saw her dull eyes, and the utter

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lack of interest in her face. "Is this all you have to say?" she asked.

"There's only one thing more. When does your Mother get back from California?"

Virginia quivered, perceptibly. "About the middle of this month, I think," she faltered.

"When she comes, do you wish to see her?"

"Oh!—Oh, no!" the voice vibrated with pain.

Charles eyed her, narrowly, for an instant. Then he observed, drily: "I should write her, at least, if I were you."

"Go away from me!—Go away!" Virginia's voice had suddenly risen almost to a scream; and in the tone was the note of impending tears. "Leave me alone!—Oh, cruel—hideous—leave me alone!"

So, after a moment, during which a subtle, ugly change crept into Van Studdiford's face, he did turn upon his heel, and tramp out of the room.

Virginia, alone, managed to subdue the active emotion roused by Charles without the tears that had so nearly come in his presence. And very soon she was back in that apathy that had been broken only on the day before.

Charles had carried things with too high a hand. He had shown her his purpose too clearly. But she made no attempt to surmise the hidden motive that kept him from the divorce court. Really, though Charles himself would, as yet, not have defined it, that motive might by now be expressed in words: Virginia, he decided, with that inner practicality of his, had been undergoing a violent attack

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of romanticism. And deep in his heart he retained the faith that, if treated correctly, any romantico-idealist might, by judicial treatment, become, in time, a very earnest student of realism.

How poor Virginia would have scoffed at such a thought! For, even after the past sixteen days, she was still stanch enough to her creed to be faithful to every former tradition. And that evening Mrs. Smith was in despair with her, and wondered what in the world the Master could have devised, in his interviews, to produce such incomprehensible moods.

It was a day or two before that excellent woman was informed of the summer plan, and lightly requested to find a cook suited to the small establishment. Charles had all a man's cheerful belief that there could be no difficulty in securing any number of competent women to fill so desirable a place. As a matter of fact, however, had it not been for an inspiration on the part of Virginia's companion, the entire arrangement might have been abandoned for want of its most necessary adjunct. Ellen Smith, however, went straight to her sister, who lived on the factory side of Grangeford with a husband and six children, and demanded of them the eldest, a girl of twenty-two, who had been out at service for three or four years. Mary, cooking in Chicago for an "elegant family," as Tim gloomily expressed it, was telegraphed for; whereupon Mary obligingly left her place, packed her small trunk, and came home. Next day she was registered in Van Studdiford's employ at an increase of two dollars a week, and the certainty of being well

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looked after by her sturdy aunt.—Now, therefore, it remained only for Virginia to accommodate herself to her husband's plan.

Resignation did come, by slow degrees, with her packing. But in what bitter woe she recommenced a task begun weeks before in highest happiness, need not be described. And when it was done there was, after all, further delay in the departure. The fifteenth of March came, and workmen still filled the cottage; nor had the new furniture gone in. Van Studdiford, highly incensed, himself made two trips to the farm and one to Chicago during the following fortnight. But only on the first of April was Mrs. Van Studdiford informed that her country house was ready for her occupancy.

By the usual perversity of feeling it was now with real regret that Virginia thought of leaving the erstwhile abhorred Grangeford. During the last week she had had more freedom than hitherto, and Charles, when she chanced to meet him, had looked less haggard, and his expression had been less stern, less discouraged. The period of hottest grief, rebellion and indignation was over, perhaps for both of them. Yet there could be no hope of change in the summer plan; and obediently, though with a heavy heart, Virginia completed her arrangements.

Spring rose from the hard earth early that year. Monday, the third of the month, the day of departure, was sunny, and warm, and cloudless. Trunks, bags and boxes, piled in a truck, had started in the morning. But not till after luncheon, which was over at half past one, did Virginia and the two members of her little household

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enter the surrey in which Sefton sat, himself contemplating a change of masters. For Sefton had not been happy since the departure of pretty Lucy Markle.

Virginia's veil was down, as she came out of the library whither she had gone, presumably to say good-bye to her husband. And, whatever others guessed, strange as it seemed to the man and the woman, there had been real emotion on each side over that farewell.

Van Studdiford did not appear on the veranda to see them off; but he did stand at a window in his study and, in the face of superstition, watch the surrey roll out of sight down the James Road.

They were out of the town limits before Virginia unveiled her face. Then, in spite of herself, she could not but perceive the beauty of the day. In this part of the state, far from the blighting North-Easters that retard the progress of the year for many weeks along the shores of the Great Lakes, signs of the new life were everywhere visible. The lilac-leaves were bursting out from the bud; pussy-willows were at the height of their silver-fuzz celebrity; willows and birches gave exquisite promise of feathery beauty soon to appear; and even the maples were no longer gauntly bare-branched. The air, for the first hour of the drive, was like new milk; and it was a delight to breathe it in, and to turn the eyes from the living earth to the glistening turquoise of the sky. For the first three or four miles Virginia was wrapped in a still intoxication that was new to her: the rejoicing of Young Nature. Then, swiftly, even as the country road grew rougher and filled with ruts and puddles, the capricious

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month shifted her scenery. Gray clouds swept up and hid the blue. With the shrouding of the sun, the air grew suddenly cold. And presently, before another mile could be traversed, a sharp North wind sprang up and was piercing their backs.

Virginia shivered under her wraps; and unconsciously her mind attuned itself anew to the day. Bitter memories of this drive came upon her, and she yielded to them, helplessly. Atkinson! Atkinson must haunt her, here, at the cottage, forever. As in a dream she passed back to a long-gone August day, and reviewed the scene at the farm: jealous Marion, Philip, all too careless, she herself, seated in the cottage during the storm. Ah! How terrified she had been. Surely it was a presentiment of the dire present, of the immediate future, when she was to live, a prisoner, in that very place.

Consumed by such thoughts and memories Virginia's head sank lower and lower upon her breast; and then, by other degrees, the memories were superseded by apathy: that dreary apathy that seemed in danger of becoming her characteristic mood. Mrs. Smith saw its approach and watched her with distress. But the good woman would say nothing. In the face of facts, she felt herself woefully helpless. Therefore she sat listening to the chatter of Mary, who talked constantly to the punctilious Sefton, though he scarcely vouchsafed a word of response, owing to the presence of his mistress. Nor could Sefton have been expected to appreciate the contentment of this raw girl. Was not he, also, like all his world, playing at being a blighted Being?

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It was twelve miles to the farm; and the surrey, considering its load, made excellent time. At four o'clock the great stables were in sight; and, ten minutes later, the carriage stopped. Virginia looked up, hastily, and was surprised to find that they were actually at their destination. But the cottage! How changed it was! as pretty, now, as it had been commonplace. Truly, Charles had done wonders with it.

The acre or two of ground by which it was immediately surrounded, was, to be sure, in a preparatory state, for which warm sun and rain would do work powerless to human hands. But on one side there was a close semicircle of woods; on the other the regular rows of orchard-trees. And by these the little place was excellently framed, and its remodelled proportions showed up to the best advantage.

Soon Virginia and her maids were within; and the mistress of the little place seated herself in the pretty, cretonne-covered living-room: a room as livable, indeed, as the most fastidious could desire. By degrees, too, though Virginia gave no orders, and only walked about the room, little matters were straightened out and arranged. Mary was in the kitchen, examining her well-filled cupboards and ice-box. Her aunt soon went upstairs, and, understanding at once the arrangement of the rooms, unlocked Virginia's trunk and her own, and began the process of unpacking. Less than an hour later, when the lady of this doll's house had removed her travelling-clothes, and sat, clad in a loose *negligée*, before one of the wide windows in her own room, looking out upon

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the half-toned country landscape, Mary appeared, carrying a little tray of afternoon tea. (Apparently Mary's family had, after all, been "elegant" to some purpose!)

When the new maid had disappeared, and Virginia sat with this old, accustomed luxury on a little stand at her knee, and could stare out again upon the tiny lawn and garden, the brown line of country road, the flat fields opposite, which, in the far distance, rose and swelled into hills which finally melted away in a blue haze on the horizon, it seemed suddenly as if she were at home after a long, dreary journey across the desert. In the last few minutes the sun had broken through again, and now lay, in long, golden bars across the Spring-land. The odor of freshly ploughed earth was mingled with the faint perfume of earliest flowers. Somewhere among the trees nearby a thrush was singing, furiously. The shadows grew longer. Twilight drew on apace. And, all at once Virginia, the weary, defeated woman, felt, stealing over her, a great sense of Peace: the peace of Nature undisturbed, that loves to wrap her tired, erring children close, and comfort them at last.

## CHAPTER XIX

THAT night, for the first time in many months, perhaps even years, Mrs. Van Studdiford went to bed with a sense of comfort in her heart ; and, almost as soon as her head touched the pillow, she fell asleep. At that moment, however, Charles, her husband, would, to one who could look through the key-hole of his library, have presented a very different picture.

A bright wood fire was the only light in the heavily furnished room. Before it, in a great, leather arm-chair, sat the master of this empty house, smoking. Charles' head lay back against the thickly padded top of his chair ; and his eyes, half-shut, gleamed with the reflection of the flames into which he was earnestly gazing. He was making no attempt to stave off the advancing legions of Memory that had tried many times before to reach him, and encompass him about, and torture him at will. In the weeks that had passed since the tenth day of February, there had been no day that had failed to bring to pass some incident that had power to sting him in the old, sore place. Long ago had Charles Van Studdiford, cold, by nature, as he was, and skeptical of womankind, enshrined his ideal of all purity in the figure of his wife. And since she had plucked this flower from herself, and cast it down, and trampled on it, her husband, though he scarcely so much as admitted it to himself, had been a

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thoroughly unhappy man. True, he had avenged the destruction of his faith. He had killed the slayer of his own honor. But, as time passed, the thought of the death of Philip had become the ugliest memory of all that ugly time. It was recalled to him by his shoulder, constantly, at the most untoward times and places. Hitherto he had striven always to put from him any suggestion of remorse. But to-night, at last, he was determined to allow himself the bitter luxury of retrospection. As he gazed down into his smouldering fire he went over, detail by detail, each painful incident of the crucial week, and its consequent events.

There had been the inquest, held on the very afternoon after the—accident. Charles, in his bandages, really suffering a good deal of pain, had been on the stand a full hour: the most trying hour, perhaps, of his life. That he had come through it, and his searching examination, triumphantly, had, even at the time, brought him small satisfaction. He remembered how unnaturally little he had been affected by the verdict: “That the deceased came to his death by shock and injuries received in the *accidental* collision of the runabout driven by cousin of the deceased, Charles Van Studdiford, and the Rock Island Early Mail: no blame thereby attaching to the said Mr. Van Studdiford.”

Ah! That one word in the decision: that saving word: “Accidental!”

At the moment when the verdict was returned, ten minutes after the retirement of the jury, Charles had been sitting in his place, near the coroner’s arm-chair, his head

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bent, his body racked with pain. He did not notice the few spectators that were in the room; but, even had he perceived the skepticism written in their faces at the last spoken clause, it would scarcely have disturbed him. The reaction, his sudden weariness and disgust with himself and the world were too great to be augmented. And, ever since that day, they had scarcely lessened. He had killed his cousin: the man whom his wife loved as she had never loved him. And—alas! alas! despite himself, despite his behavior, despite even Muriel Howard, Charles himself loved that wife, still!

It was this unaccountable and unavoidable knowledge that brought his greatest bitterness: realization of an unmanly weakness in him who was, above all other things, a thorough man's man. Had he possessed a higher standard of womanhood he might, perhaps, have felt his love destroyed together with his faith. As it was, he accepted the deception as characteristic of the sex, and found that the delight of Virginia's personality had not wholly changed for him.

Till very late he sat over the fire in his lonely room, struggling with a mass of psychological facts such as he had not been trained to cope with. But at last, somewhere in the small hours, he rose, stiffly, and went upstairs, to continue his reverie in bed. And, as he ascended, he shivered at the feel of the silent, empty house. Passing Virginia's door he realized, in his secret heart, that he would gladly have given half his fortune to have known her, his wife, within, as of old.

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Unpleasant as Charles' last weeks had been, and final as was his solution of the problem, he was nevertheless aware that there still remained for him a scene or two to be dreaded more than anything which had as yet come to pass. The first of these had been delayed so much longer than was natural, that now and again he had permitted himself the hope that it was not, after all, to be faced.

Vain illusion! The delay seemed merely to have been caused by his malignant Fate, that the event, when it came to pass, might, by unexpectedness, seem the more unpleasant.

On the morning of Saturday, the eighth of April, Charles was sitting at a late breakfast—the result of one of those final naps after a sleepless night—when Carson, after a summons to the door, reentered the dining-room with marked signs of disturbance in his well-trained face. Charles, glancing at him, inquired, rather harshly: “What is it?” But even as the question left his lips, he divined the answer.

“Madame Dupré, Sir,” was the expected reply.

“Umph!—Where have you put her, Carson?”

“She went herself into the library, Sir.”

“Tell her I shall be with her in one moment.—No.—Don’t.” Charles hastily swallowed his coffee, left the table, and walked to the west door of his invaded sanc-tum. At the handle, he paused another second. Then, visibly straightening, he jerked the door open, and went in.

On the instant of his appearance another figure, seated

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with her back to the window, rose; and at sight of her Charles suddenly halted. She was in deep mourning; and, framed in the sombre head-dress, with its tiny white ruche lying against her hair, Georgiana's face was more exquisite than ever.

Charles looked her keenly over, and greeted her steadily. "Good morning, Georgiana. For you, this is rather an early call."

She made no reply to his words, but began her explanation at once, in a low, rapid voice: "It was only last night that I finally decided to come. Then, no train left soon enough.—I have been at Hot Spring for a month. The rest of the time has been spent in wondering—chiefly about you."

"You rather flatter me."

"I have wondered, and wondered, and wondered: first, who betrayed them to you; secondly, if you really did know everything.—It was so hideously cold-blo—" Suddenly, cool as she had been up to this point, her voice broke. She did not attempt to finish her sentence.

"Sit down, please," said her cousin, in a panic at the prospect of tears. He himself selected his favorite chair, made himself physically comfortable, and gave her time for composure before he observed, quietly: "I wish you would select any topic but this, which, believe me, is totally unfit for discussion between you and me."

"Yes! It is very unfit," cried she, in a high, hard voice, "to talk of a man to his—murderer!"

Charles sprang up as if he had been shot. "You lie!" he cried. Then, realizing the woman and her

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excuse, he fell back again, murmuring: "I beg your pardon."

There was a moment's silence. Georgiana sat perfectly still, studying the face of her cousin; and, little by little, the great bitterness within her found triumphant relief in the traces of his recent days. He was frowning, angrily, and his hands grasped the arms of the chair till his fingers were bloodless. Nevertheless, it was he who spoke first, with a strong effort after composure:

"There was, in this case, no murder. You, who seem to know so much, should surely recognize that. And yet, if I had shot him, like the dog he was, in this very house, not a jury in the country but would have returned me a verdict of justifiable homicide; and not a man in the country but would have shaken me by the hand. As it was—umph! You should thank me. I gave him a chance for his life.—But sometimes, it seems, Providence really arranges these little matters."

"'Chance for his life!' My God!—He was on the wrong side of the runabout, of course!"

"It was I that was on the side nearest the train.—We were going South-West. The train came from the North. I was driving." He slightly shrugged his shoulders.

For the moment, Georgiana was silenced; and, on that account, the angrier. For a long time they sat staring at each other, till Van Studdiford, recalling the factory, asked, politely:

"Is there anything more I can say?—What was the object of your visit?"

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She made no answer; for she had failed in the object of her visit, and Charles knew it. In some wild, woman's way, maddened by a grief wholly sincere and very great, sweeping aside logic, even sense, she had in some way hoped to frighten Charles by what was now revealed as a merely childish accusation. She had thought to get him into grave trouble; for, in her impulsive nature, there ran a streak of revengefulness that would have done justice to a member of the Latin race. However, after a stubborn silence, another thought came: an idea which, after all, seemed to promise much.

"And your wife, Charles. May I see her?"

"She is staying in the country."

"Oh!—Where?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I should like to go to see her. I am devoted to Virginia."

"I am sorry that I cannot give you her address."

"But why?"

"Obviously, because I don't care to have you see her."

"Whom does she see, then?"

"Not many people."

"Any people?"

"Certainly."

"But whom?—Whom?"

"Madame Dupré, I am not called upon to answer your catechisms. You must excuse me this one."

"Ah, but I shall *not* excuse you! You are inexcusable! You kill your own cousin. You keep your wife a

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prisoner, alone, in some dismal country hole. You put on a righteous air and ‘refuse to answer questions.’ But I won’t bear it! I will not! I will not! You have got to answer me. You have got to make restitution to my brother—my Philip! You killed him. No one doubts that. And I swear to you that I shall never rest till I see you fully punished for the thing you have done. I swear it!—Philip, beloved, I swear it to you!”

She was very impassioned, and she looked singularly beautiful as she stood, her heavy black veil falling about her, her white face uplifted. But Charles had ceased to be impressed. He was, in fact, disgusted with her folly and her theatrical manner. After all, she was only a cousin. Therefore, at the end of her last speech, without any pause to smooth the contrast, he rose, and observed, in his most business-like tone:

“I regret it very much; but I am due at the factory. Be good enough to excuse me. Carson will serve your luncheon at whatever hour you wish.” And, with a slight bow, he left the room whence Georgiana, with lowered veil, soon followed him.

All that day Charles was in excellent spirits. One of the two dreaded encounters had passed off so easily, so absurdly, that the other at once began to loom less gigantically on his horizon. But here, as might be expected, he was underrating matters.

As it happened, the second scene came close upon the heels of the first; and was by no means so simple as its predecessor.

It was during the second week in April that the Mer-

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rills came home from California. The climate of Santa Barbara, where the two had gone to retrench, after some weeks of the Hotel Green at Pasadena, had agreed with John Merrill better than any yet discovered in all their weary travels. And, had it not been for one thing, they would have remained there throughout April and into May. But Mrs. Merrill had become exceedingly uneasy about Virginia, from whom she had not heard in more than a month. And, with her Mother's instinct fully roused, she suspected serious trouble, bore the discomfort of it as long as she could, and then carried her invalid Eastward once more.

Arrived in Chicago, her first act was to write to Charles. It was a short note, but it required an immediate reply. Receiving it, Charles took the brave course, waived all questions, and asked his Mother-in-law to lunch with him on the next day but one: Wednesday, the nineteenth of April. The invitation was immediately accepted; and Charles had one, endless night, in which to decide on his plan of disclosure.

In his heart he was aware that he had before him a pitiable task; for, unlike Georgiana Dupré, he believed Mrs. Merrill to be entirely ignorant of her daughter's recent history. Charles could realize, pretty adequately, just what it was going to mean to tell a woman whom he respected as thoroughly as he respected Mrs. Merrill, the story that would justify the present situation of her daughter. And Virginia was the only child! Van Studdiford fairly groaned as he thought of the half-hour that he must inflict upon her; and of the

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nights that she would go home to: nights even worse, perhaps, than those he had lately known!

The inevitable, however, arrived. On Wednesday Charles himself met the 11.45 train from which Mrs. Merrill alighted; and twelve o'clock saw them at the house. There was still an hour before luncheon; and Charles wondered, nervously, as they entered the hall, just how it was to be got through; for, for some reason, it had not been his plan to have the explanation before the meal. It was strange enough that he should have overlooked the inevitable question that must plunge them at once into the midst of everything. Mrs. Merrill had not removed her gloves when she said, quietly:

"I suppose that Virginia is ill, Charles. If she can bear it, may I go up to her at once?"

Charles experienced a quickening of the heart. Then he replied, gravely and quietly: "Virginia is not upstairs, Mrs. Merrill. In fact, she is not in the house at all."

The Mother turned a blank face upon him. "Where—is—she?" she asked, faintly, her face suddenly the color of ashes.

"Ah!—She is quite well!" said Charles, hastily, reading her fear.—"She is now on a farm of mine, a few miles South of Grangeford.—Just a moment, I beg of you." He rang the bell in the hall, and Carson appeared speedily.

"Two glasses of sherry and some biscuits in the library at once."

The butler bowed and vanished. Van Studdiford, turning to his companion, was shocked anew at sight of

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her face. The youth, the prettiness, were quite gone from it. She looked, suddenly, very, very old.

"Mrs. Merrill, if you will be good enough to come into the library and sit down, we will have our little talk in there, together."

They were just seated, Mrs. Merrill in a low chair with her back to the East window, Charles opposite her, when Carson returned with the refreshment. Mrs. Merrill accepted the glass of wine and an Albert biscuit, but seemed inclined to partake of neither. The butler having departed, however, Van Studdiford explained, quietly:

"What I have to tell you, my dear Madam, is not pleasant. Please drink your wine, if you will be so good."

Mrs. Merrill, with a new sinking of the heart, obeyed him, mechanically, and then, setting down her glass, turned toward him a white, set face.

Charles, tightly grasping one arm of his chair, and knitting his brows, began, after a moment's hesitation, to speak:

"Mrs. Merrill, I must preface my story with one statement which, however strange you may afterward think it, I must beg you to believe and to bear in mind throughout our talk. I love Virginia to-day as deeply as, though differently than, I loved her when I asked her to marry me." He paused, expecting a question; but his guest did not speak.

"Do you remember, Mrs. Merrill, a certain cousin of mine, Philip Atkinson, who lunched with us once at—"

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"I remember him perfectly, Charles, both there and here.—*What of him?*"

"Two months ago, while driving with me, he was killed. We were run into by a Rock Island train."

Mrs. Merrill shuddered, convulsively. "Driving with you?—Weren't *you* terribly hurt?"

"Not terribly. I broke a bone, and bruised myself up a good deal. But it was very little.—There is some sort of high justice, I suppose.—Well, that affair was not an accident. I drove across the track, in front of the train, on purpose."

"Good Heavens!"

"It was perfectly fair. It gave the two of us an even chance."

Mrs. Merrill rose unsteadily to her feet. "Charles! What do you mean?—For God's sake, *what* do you mean?"

"Mrs. Merrill—I would rather—face a battery than tell you this thing.—But you must know.—You see, it was necessary that one of us should be out of the way. We—both loved Virginia. She only cared for—one—of us." He bent his head, slightly, but lifted it again as the Mother's voice rang through the room.

"You—you—do you mean to say—are you telling me, that my daughter is—a—a criminal?"

"That is a harsh word, Mrs. Merrill." His voice was rough and unsteady, now.

"Harsh?—It is—true!—Oh, God!—Oh, my God! It is I that am to blame! I am to blame!" She sank down again into the chair, and, dropping her face into her

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hands, gave herself up to this hideous realization of her old-time, secret fear.

For some moments there was silence in the room. Charles was gazing at his visitor with deeply interested sympathy in his red face. And, after a little, carried by that sympathy quite beyond his habitual, masculine reticence, he moved a little nearer to her, and began to speak, in a low, uncertain voice.

"Mrs. Merrill, I have lived with this thing for a long time. I know every sensation it has to offer, from hatred and jealousy to what you're going through just now. But I have come to a conclusion; and I will tell it to you.

"You are doing what I did: taking the usual verdict of the world and of history; and, in your bitterness, you are inclined to regard the past climax as final. It is not. It isn't nearly so important as we like to make it out to be.

"If Virginia had had a love affair—had even been engaged—before we were married, no one would have thought much of it, or been in the least shocked. But Virginia was married too young to have had any experience of men; and I am scarcely the type that a romantic girl would choose for her first hero. Atkinson was, exactly; and he was a good actor through the whole business—even to his last words—" murmured Charles to himself, musingly. Then, straightening, he went on: "They saw a lot of each other here while I was working overtime at the factory.—In short, you see, Virginia had to have her youth out. I wonder if, after all, women aren't constituted pretty much like men? While they're young, they are full of animal spirits, and they want to

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expend them on an object satisfying to the eye.—You see, I don't express these things well; but you'll understand.

"So, Mrs. Merrill, as I told you at first, I love Virginia still; and I want to bring her back to me, this time for good. I intend her to spend the summer in a comfortable sort of cottage on my farm, twelve miles from nowhere. She has two women with her, one of 'em as trustworthy, almost, as you would be. But I want to make her a little lonely. In the autumn, I think, she may come home.—Meantime, will you trust her to me?"

Little by little, as Charles talked, as his well-thought-out words fell upon her chaotic mind, Mrs. Merrill lifted her head and was brought out of herself. When he finished, she was on her feet, tears filled her eyes, and the color was creeping back into her face.

"Charles Van Studdiford, may the good God bless you! I trust my girl to you now as I did not on her wedding-day.—I never knew, I should not have dreamed, that you were so generous, so wise, so true a man: one so infinitely better than she deserves!"

And, as he clasped Mrs. Merrill's outstretched hand, Charles twisted, uneasily, blushed a vivid scarlet, but found it impossible to speak, and quite as impossible to avoid blowing his nose.

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For a fortnight or so after this conversation, Van Studdiford was more contented than he had been for nearly a year past. Nevertheless, he was a flesh-and-blood fellow, and not of the kind that can exist on the supreme consciousness of well-doing, to the exclusion of

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everything else. Because Van Studdiford honestly regretted a wife who had never cared for him, nor in any way deserved his affection, he had by no means become a fully developed ascetic. On the contrary, as the days dragged by, the emptiness of the great house on the hill jarred more and more on his nerves, and his magnanimity began to be tempered by an inarticulate resentment against the wife who, in her isolation, was now bitterly regretting the fact of her birth.

By degrees, then, imperceptible and not to be noted, Van Studdiford slipped to a pretty low level, finally permitting himself a luxury that he was to regret, later, to the end of his life. On the fifteenth day of May the little house in Burton street was given up. And, to the horror of Grangeford and the scandalized interest of the Van Studdiford servants, a new, temporary mistress was installed in the house on the hill. Henceforth a vigorous and impetuous blonde was to be addressed, by Carson the imperturbable, as "Madam." A new lady's maid sat at table in the basement dining-room: a maid with an infinite fund of hushed stories, involving names sacred in the "great world" of Chicago Society. And the maid's mistress, Muriel Howard, was installed in her long-time master's own house, at last. But, to recount the one, saving shred of Charles' honor, she never set foot in Virginia's locked rooms.

## CHAPTER XX

DURING this period, between the first of April and the first of June, by which time Charles had characteristically adjusted himself to the new conditions of his Grangeford life, Virginia was enduring weeks more direful than she had dreamed that weeks could be: a time in which the very minutes stretched themselves out to hours, and every hour was a day. Nor could she know the meagre consolation that this long emptiness contained for her the finest of all lessons. To her, stunned with grief, helpless, and above all, still selfish, it was only a cruel infliction, a vast waste, a prison-house from which she daily prayed for, implored, or despaired of, escape.

During those weeks there was spread before her, around her, a natural scene, slowly changing, always exquisite, to which she was not wholly insensible, but of which she understood nothing. Her childhood had been too unnatural to admit of her comprehending and adequately loving the kindly country at one glance. Those few rare weeks in which, with her baby at her side, she had, through the child and for it, come to love the autumnal phase of Nature, had been long since banished from her memories. Now, in an inarticulate sort of way, she appreciated the development of the living things. Her character was refined enough for this. But she could not

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extract from it those lessons of patience and thoughtfulness and understanding of Natural Law which were laid before her daily, in a hundred forms. The delicate, bird-thrilling dawns, the gentle mornings, sun-swept noons, later shadows and lingering half-lights: the bloom-laden apple-trees, the perfect silver-green of the birches and locusts, the golden-starred pastures, the tinkling brook, the line of crimson sunset behind the dark, upstretching woods: these things surrounded her, were seen by her, but did not yield her their essence.

Moreover, there was one want in her house greater to her than the sum of all the other comforts. By what Virginia believed to be a gross forgetfulness, in reality because, on reflection, the probable influence of the mournful Chopin seemed to Charles to promise a real danger, there was, after all, no piano in the farm-cottage. To Virginia the lack was first an amazement (for she had never in her life lived anywhere without a piano); and, secondly, a dire grievance. To most of the world the extent to which she missed the instrument would have seemed absurd. But she had long been in the habit of regarding it as her confidant, and of pouring out upon it, in melody or chord or discord, every inmost thought or hope of her heart.

For many weeks, then, she found no recompense for the loss of her dearest recreation. Books—of which there was an excellent assortment in the living-room—sewing, gardening, walks, riding, even bee-keeping, were suggested by Mrs. Smith, or by her own restless mind. At first she took an interest in none of these; but, by de-

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grees, a combination of pursuits began to replace the neglected music, till the unbearableness of her life passed away, and a certain number of hours each day were got through with durably, if not quite with contentment.

It was a long time, however, three months and more, before the new routine became familiar enough to bring with it a suggestion of cheerfulness. When that time arrived, however, the daily occupations were eagerly and earnestly performed. Perhaps her state of mind for the first, dreadful period, that time of self-centred wretchedness, was not to be attributed wholly to selfishness, after all. No one, least of all herself, could estimate exactly the extent or the nature of the shock caused by Philip's death. Certainly for a long time she appeared to have been stunned into insensibility. Everyone that came in contact with her watched for and failed to find any sign of an absorbing grief. They could not know how impossible it still was for her to believe him dead: that time and again she saw his lithe figure at the gate of the little garden, and, heart leaping high, started down the path to meet him, only to be brought up, after a few steps, by swift disillusion. But by night, in her dreams, his coming was sure and sweet. They talked, and loved, and wept together, as of old; and, for a time, Virginia woke daily to a half-belief that one of the well-known old-time nights had been repeated.

The first overwhelming shock of realization came during May, in the letter that Mrs. Merrill finally wrote her child. After that bitter interview with her son-in-law, it had taken the mother four long weeks to face the new

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knowledge of her daughter, and that daughter's situation. In the letter that she finally wrote, were signs of every variety of misery that she had endured. It contained hardness, chilliness, stern reproaches, and again an aching, yearning tenderness; all of which pierced Virginia's armor like fangs of poison-creatures. It was a week before she could steel herself to reply; and, by that time, she had begun that refuge of the unhappy, the guilty, the vain and the idle:—a private journal. She was now, therefore, in a fair way to renewed self-deception.

However, either by good-fortune, or by an unexpected forbearance, her reply to Mrs. Merrill's letter contained no indulgence of denial, excuse or reproach. And by this, perhaps unconsciously, she won back a part of the Mother-treasure that she had lost, and also secured, for the ensuing months, a source of unfailing comfort. For, at the first, hasty reading of her daughter's missive, Mrs. Merrill's anger, and, to a large extent, her distrust, were dispelled; and she was able to write Virginia again in something of the old, loving way. Henceforth her letters contained a tender pity; and rarely bore any suggestions of reproach about the past. Thus, finally, it was the correspondence with her Mother that kept Virginia's head above water when the whirling, rushing tide of understanding had really caught her.

In the meantime, an occasional diversion was offered in another way. The family at the farmhouse, Thompson, his wife, and his daughter-in-law, took a more or less romantic interest in the master's pretty, unhappy wife. They were inclined to show her what timid

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attentions they could, and she was still more inclined to accept them. More than once, for instance, Thompson himself drove her, in the high "spring-wagon," (which appeared to take its name from there not being the vestige of a spring about it), to Hilton, the nearest town to the South: a county-seat. And, the first couple of times, Virginia enjoyed the jolting drive, was amused at sight of the shopping, and pleased to help pile the various purchases into the wagon: sugar, and molasses, and tea, and calico dress-goods, acquired by Thompson with the aid of much gossip concerning the weather and crop probabilities. On the third trip, however, Virginia was herself led to enter the dry-goods store, with the idea of buying some of the atrocities displayed in the shop-window simply because any sort of buying seemed a delightful novelty. Not till her package was done up, and a clerk was gently suggesting the price, did she realize that she had not a cent in her pocket: that, worse still, there was not more than two or three dollars in her purse at the cottage. She was, truly, a penniless Princess. And never had she more bitterly resented her poverty than at the moment when she understood that she must ask Thompson to pay her petty bill; and that she could not dream of having what Mrs. Thompson had grandly sent her husband to buy.

Thereafter, to Thompson's regretful surprise, Virginia went no more to Hilton. The journey was too embittering. But the experience led her to inquire of Mrs. Smith about their mode of living; and, to her consternation, she discovered that there was no money at all sent

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to the cottage. The wages of Mrs. Smith and Mary were deposited in the Grangeford Bank; and, when any groceries, or necessary articles of food, clothing or furniture were needed, the list was simply mailed to Van Studdiford, and the things arrived, unfailingly, next day, by special delivery.

Van Studdiford's ruse would have appeared simple to anyone but his wife. He wanted to make her ask him for money. But, as no such idea as this ever crossed her mind, he waited in vain for the request. On the contrary, it was the discovery of this mode of living, the knowledge that no money could be obtained in the cottage, that gave Virginia her first wild dream of flight.

Summer was now at its height. June, and all the red and pink and white roses in the front yard, were dying together. The weather was hot and moist, the whole sunny atmosphere filled, from morning till night, with the heavy fragrance of the luxuriant, growing world. Now there was to be found no stalk without its flower, no honey-cup without its bee: the marriage-messenger of flowers. The birds had finished nesting, and little ones were beginning to fly away. Morning and evening, all the wide atmosphere vibrated with loud-throated songs of praise, accompanied by the instrumental scrapings of katydids and tree-toads, and the distant boom of the big bull-frogs in the marsh. Virginia, wandering abroad through the mornings, wondered at what she saw, but suffered many a bitter heart-ache from her great loneliness in the midst of the universal, exuberant joy of this, the lovers' season.

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Alas! How she missed Philip now! how bitterly, constantly, absolutely! Her simple existence reminded her daily of their dreams and plans of such a life together: a *life*; not this mere, dreary watching of the passage of days. The two had talked of it, of old. They had written of it more. They—or, rather, Virginia—had dreamed of it through many an hour before that horrible February dawn. This life that she was leading now: ah! it would have been exquisite, had Philip but been with her to live her days; to drink the morning coffee, rich with hot milk, eat the rolls spread thick with fragrant butter churned the day before; to wander, before the sun was high, through field and orchard, pasture and wood, following the gay little brook to its source in a shadowy grove, where just a handful of crystal water bubbled up out of the ferns; later, when the day had become too oppressive, to retreat with her into the well-shaded cottage, there to dream away long, beautiful hours in each other's arms, sometimes over a book, more often just with their own, divine love; and, finally, upon the descent of the perfumed twilight, to sit in the flower-tangled garden, and gaze upward, while Mother Nature hung before them, one by one, the choicest of her canvases, ending, finally, with that of Evening: just a misty, blue-gray background, strung with golden crescent and diamond-pointed stars, toward which the dew-damped earth sent up a store of overpowering incense, gathered through the day. Hand in hand they should sit and watch, till—the dear dream faded, and Virginia beheld the truth, and saw herself forever alone. Truly, such imaginings as these had their penalty. When

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they were at an end she had tasted to the full her cup of loneliness; and the hour of black dejection would once more merge into the secret, vengeful plan of flight.

In the beginning of this living in imaginary worlds the dream most frequently indulged was that of going to her Mother. By a good deal of travelling on foot, and the greatest possible care, her little bit of money (which Charles did not know she possessed) might suffice to get her to Chicago, where she could certainly find her way from the station to the Metropole Hotel. Yet, often as she planned this journey, it was, in the end, always stopped by the same obstacle: a sensation of stubborn pride. If her Mother wanted her, surely she might ask for her, or would come to see her. The trip to Grangeford and thence to the cottage, could scarcely be an impossible feat. Why, why, most passionately why, did not her Mother come?

As a matter of fact, that same question had given Van Studdiford a good deal of inconvenience; and had many times come between Mrs. Merrill and her conscience. But Caroline Merrill was nearly as sensible as she was strong-willed; and, often as she yearned to take her wayward girl into her arms and give her comfort, she knew that Virginia did indeed deserve this summer's punishment. During her talk with Van Studdiford she had listened, amazed, to his estimation of the importance of his wife's love-affair. In one way, of course, she was eager to agree with him. In another way she beheld, with clear and pitying conviction, that the bitter lesson of greatest loneliness must be learned by heart before

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Virginia Van Studdiford could become a big-souled, womanly woman. Thus it was that the Mother left her child alone in the retreat provided by her husband; and only in her letters did she allow a little of her tenderness to overflow in written words.

From the thought of her Mother, therefore, Virginia always turned, in anger, to other possibilities: those of a life alone, in which she should gain her own living, by—teaching music, to stupid pupils, at a dollar, or, at most, two dollars a lesson? Ugh! That was a dream that never progressed very far. She was, doubtless, better off in the present than that. Here, at least, her meals were well cooked and served.—Ah! What could she have asked more if Philip could be with her here—And so the weary round again.

Through June and July her dream-days were many and ardent; and from every one of them the thought of Charles was painfully shut away. But in the burning days of August Virginia drooped, visibly, both in mind and in body. There were many headaches now; and often she kept her room, sometimes her bed, through two nights and a day. Mrs. Smith began to watch over her with some anxiety. She complained, however, far less than of old, and seemed genuinely grateful for services that had, in the past, been demanded as a matter of course. She who had not known the meaning of gratitude toward Lucy, who had risked reputation and life for her, now rarely failed to thank Mrs. Smith for so much as a glass of water poured out and handed to her, or her salts brought without the asking. She was

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gentler, too, than formerly: more thoughtful, and more silent. The healthy tone of the life that had recently surrounded her was struggling hard to subdue the effects of wrong-thinking and wrong-living; and what could Virginia be but a passive battle-ground? Mrs. Smith, however, did not like the shadows that now lay permanently beneath her eyes; nor did she fail to perceive that the former slenderness had become thinness. And the good woman was not a little disturbed as she watched her charge lie, hour after hour, motionless, with closed eyes, upon her bed in a darkened room, never, as the good woman was well aware, asleep.

Mrs. Smith, however, would have been almost startled had she known the direction that Virginia's thoughts were taking nowadays. The change had begun so imperceptibly that Virginia herself had not felt it. Yet she dreamed, now, not of Philip, not of her Mother, neither of the injustice of her punishment; but, first of all, of her baby; and then, a little later, of the baby's Father, the husband who would not free himself from her, and against whom she had greatly sinned. The wish to see Charles again was the last thing to arrive; but, in time, the prospect of this became an event rather to be looked forward to than dreaded. By the end of August she believed that if she could only see her husband she should meet him as they had never met before. Perhaps she could even make him understand—how she had changed.

As if in obedience to her unexpressed wish, in reality because Charles himself despaired of her sending for him, and because he could no longer restrain his desire to see

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her and know how she progressed, her husband did come to the cottage, arriving at noon, on Saturday September the ninth.

And still—oh, highest perversity of the human race! —with all their careful preparation, with all the wish on both sides to meet as they should have met, their interview went all awry. With Charles it was, perhaps, the guilty image of Muriel Howard that stood between him and his wife—the wife whose appearance startled him, so frail had she become. Virginia, however, had no reason for her behavior. The image of Philip now no longer entirely filled her mental vision; and afterwards, severely questioning, she could find no excuse whatsoever for her coldness. When, however, in the sudden agitation following Mrs. Smith's flurried announcement, Virginia had hurriedly rearranged her hair, waited long enough to recover her poise, and then started down the narrow stairs, she had a sudden, overwhelming rush of feeling; and all the old distaste, disgust and repulsion settled down on her again. In the moment, too, of coming face to face with him, of looking up the stocky figure to the red face, with its pale eyes, red moustache, and shiny expanse of head overtopping the whole, the resentment was deepened. Oh! Alas, alas! Charles had grown stouter! Charles was detestable still!

Virginia's manner was very quiet, very cool, very civil. But the man felt himself held off from her as if she stood in an Arctic atmosphere and would not let him freeze himself. In the first instant of their meeting he felt her mood; and, at this quick frustration of his dearest hope,

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since he beheld her exactly as of old, distant, haughty, unapproachable, the heart within him sank, and his own manner stiffened and grew cold.

To a listener, their greeting would have seemed that of rather slight acquaintances, met, by chance, in some lonely spot.

"I—I am very much surprised.—We had not in the least expected to see you. You will find our luncheon extremely light, I am afraid; and there is not a drop of wine or whiskey in the house. What shall you drink?"

"Oh, that's all right. Too warm for anything but beer. Thompson may have that. Otherwise—well, what does it matter?—How are you?"

Virginia made no offer to send to Thompson's for the beer. As she seated herself, at some little distance from him, she merely answered his last question: "I am perfectly well, thank you. Should I not be, after so careful a summer?"

"H'm!—But the winter?—What about the winter, Virginia? Aren't you coming back to Grangeford?"

At the question, Virginia's face did not change. Neither, however, did she make an immediate reply. She had brought down a fan with her, which she now used to conceal her face a little. The slight crackle of it, as it passed back and forth, was the only sound in the room. Finally, with a quiver at her heart, and a corresponding coldness in her voice, she asked: "I suppose you still refuse to do what I so earnestly asked of you, at the—at the time of—last February?"

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"What's that?—Oh—Divorce!" he cried, harshly.  
"Yes, by God! I do refuse it!—Confound it all, haven't you had enough of this thing yet?"

He rose, and stared angrily about him, as if to discover some hidden fascination in the room. In a moment Virginia answered, still quite calmly and coldly: "I had had enough of it one week after I arrived."

"Then why the Devil don't you come back to Grangeford?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and, though perfectly aware of her perverseness, answered, with a faint smile: "Because, out of two evils, one chooses the lesser."

This time, Charles found no reply. His red face lost a little of its brilliant color, and he went back and sat down again in his chair near the window. "So—it is a great evil to live with me!—So you really don't care at all," he said, in a husky voice, without any rising inflection at the end of the last sentence.

"Oh, I didn't say that." So much was forced out of Virginia, by a combination of remorse and tyrannical truth.

"But you meant it.—Well, I'll not stay for lunch, I think.—Good-by."

"No, no, Charles!—Don't go!—I—you—you'll be faint before you get back to Grangeford."

"Nonsense!—And why should you care if I am?—Good-by." He held out his hand, resolutely.

Suddenly Virginia began to want him to stay. At the same time, she found herself tongue-tied. She accepted his hand for an instant, and then managed to utter,

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more stiffly than she intended: "I am so sorry, Charles.—Do stay for luncheon!"

"No thanks." He withdrew his hand from hers.

"Charles!"

"Yes?"

"If I should *want* to return to Grangeford, may I?"

He halted, turned, and looked at her keenly. "Always!—You are always my wife. My home is yours.—Let me know when you are ready to come—home!"

And, as he strode out of the house, the expression on his face was considerably softened, and there was a sparkle in his eyes. He went up to Thompson's, ate a hasty luncheon there, to the astonishment of the farmer's wife and daughter-in-law, and then set out on his return to Grangeford. That drive, for all the momentary relenting of Virginia's manner, was not a pleasant one. He had hoped for so much more: even to return with the date of Virginia's coming settled. Also—he had intended, and hoped, to give Muriel her *congé* that evening. For, oh! how tired he was of that woman, who, living in the same house with him, had been able to hide none of those unpleasantnesses of character and manner that are inherent in us all, but are much magnified in women of her stamp. Yet he was to blame for her presence; and he knew that he must now endure it for a little longer; because she was all he had.

Fifteen minutes after Van Studdiford had left the cottage Mrs. Smith, after coughing loudly at the door, came into the living-room to announce luncheon. To her amazement the only occupant of the room was Virginia. She

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could discover no one else.—Who, then, was to eat the chickens? And who was to drink the beer, which, by her own forethought, had just been brought down from the farmhouse?—These questions, however, she did not ask; for she could have got no answer from her mistress, who lay, face downward, on the sofa sobbing as if her heart would break.

## CHAPTER XXI

THAT year Charles Van Studdiford spent the most unpleasant autumn of his life. First of all he was in a state of great disgust with himself. Secondly, he was thoroughly cured of his passion for Muriel Howard; and yet he felt that he had no particular reason for driving her out of his lonely house. Thirdly, Grangeford, and all the people therein were disgusted with him. Fourthly, and above all the rest, he still regretted Virginia, still wanted to see her in her rightful place, and had begun, in his disillusionment, to see himself in a thoroughly unfavorable light with regard to his past treatment of her.

When a man of wealth and standing, through some whim, or disappointment, or mistake, takes a woman not his wife into his own house, and openly, before his world, displays her there, he does a remarkably foolish thing. Neither the man nor the woman can possibly be happy. Each is completely out of his natural element; and, worse still, the man is far more miserable than the woman, because he has lost what she has never had: standing among his kind. Even before midsummer Charles had learned the folly of his angry impulse, and bitterly had he regretted it then. But more, most bitterly, was he regretting it now. Good women, whom he had known all his

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life, and who had known his Mother before him, now passed him in the town without a glance in his direction. The Misses Heminway even crossed the street that they might not have the embarrassment of meeting him face to face. And the best of the men, all of them warm friends of his, and, in the old days, proud of knowing him, held aloof, and made their "good-days" chilly and curt; for his way of life they felt to be an insult to their wives and their daughters.

Because of his life, the tide of gossip against Virginia had now turned; and nothing much harsher than pity was felt for her. Her husband's behavior seemed to excuse any folly she might have been guilty of with the dead cousin; and crime was rarely laid at her door. Only Marion Hunt, though aghast at Charles' actions, still retained, in the midst of her mourning, the sting of jealousy of her erstwhile friend; and, though her tongue was silent, there lay in her heart much that was to be cast in the way of Virginia's restoration to society.

No doubt the town attributed a certain sort of happiness, of a wild, orgiacal character, to Charles, in his present life. And this, not unnaturally, caused almost as much indignation as the fact of his fault. They never dreamed how the idea wronged him. Three years of married life with fastidious Virginia, contrasted with four months of unmarried existence with Muriel Howard, had been a revelation to Van Studdiford. He could now have given violent testimony of the uselessness, the vulgarity, the revolting callousness, lying beneath the very thin layer

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of fascination in the women of the half-world. By the first of September he was spending as many solitary, morose evenings in his library as had been his wont in Atkinson's time. And while Muriel Howard was raging against her position to her maid, and Carson was setting his fellow-servants an example of cool disregard of "the Madam's" orders, Charles found himself beginning a species of self-communion which was moulding his mind anew. Had Virginia been able to gaze into her husband's brain she would have been amazed at the trend of his thoughts. He began, like his wife, by dreaming of the baby. That little daughter, whom, in life, he had scarcely considered at all, he yearned for, mourned, regretted, as even Virginia could scarcely regret her—now. And out of the little, vanished baby life, rose a vision for Charles: a vision, which, cherished by night and by day, grew radiant before him, and put hope into his heart: the hope of a great future joy. The vague dream, which there was so little possibility of transforming into reality, became, as the days passed, dearer to him than had been, in his courtship period, the prospect of marriage with pretty Virginia Merrill. His was now to be something finer than an idea of marriage: it had become an ideal. The wife was still to be Virginia. (Dear God! Would she come back to him?) And he and she were to learn to know each other tenderly and truthfully. No man, no woman, not even the great American Ghost of Business, was to come between them now. They were to be passionate devotees of their Lares and Penates. And because of these things, as the full years passed, many children,

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boys and girls, should come to them, to be reared in love, and taught to honor their parents. Truth and fidelity were to be the watchwords of the new life; and sacrifice should be made to it by both:—the sacrifice of all those little selfish pettinesses never, hitherto, renounced by anyone. It was a strong man's chastened dream of Happiness. Would it, could it, come to pass?—The first step would be the most difficult; for he knew now that, if they were to begin in the true way, Virginia must come home to him of her own free will.

Just now, had Virginia been asked the question as to whether she wished to return to him, she would probably have answered, hotly, "No!" But, just because of the heat, one, clear-seeing, might have divined a discrepancy between the words and the thought that lay behind the monosyllable.

Indeed, the woman, watching, in her loneliness, the lingering death of Summer and the short, glowing life of Autumn, had come perilously near the borderland of Despair. These weeks of late September and October formed her dark hour; and again and again she refused to allow the dawn to break. In her heart of hearts she, like Charles, knew, probably, that even in the midst of so much wrong there remained still the living germ of Right for both of them. Was it, then, only Pride, that stupidest, most doubtful of the virtues, that was to stand in her way to the very end? Alas! As yet no one could tell. Virginia herself did not know the extent of her peril. She had never even suspected the existence of Muriel Howard; and had no conception of the hideous

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things that might result from too long a delay on her part. She knew the real characteristics of men not at all. The real side of any man had never, actually, been presented to her; and how was she to surmise their many possibilities? Moreover, even had she known her danger, would salvation have been hastened? Who can say? As it was, day after day, for weeks, the question was weighed in the most fragile of balances; and, with that strangest characteristic of her sex, she, honestly longing to go back to Grangeford, to Charles, nevertheless, for fifty-six dreary days, contemplated, unceasingly, the prospect of spending the winter in the cottage.

By this time Virginia's little household was in a ferment of discontent, which, continually encountered, had to be recognized. As the days became chilly and short, and the mornings in the cottage grew cheerless and cold, Mrs. Smith and her niece, who had never dreamed of spending more than the summer (and that on very large wages) in this lonely spot, became unmanageable and sulky, and pictured discontent from morning until night. But, the more fervent their expressions of displeasure with the cottage and its surroundings, the more stubbornly did Virginia vow to stay, and the more persistently did she shut away from her dreams of—home.

Autumn drew along. The gorgeous colorings of the foliage faded and grew old, and sombre, and dead. The rustling leaves were brown, now, and fluttered daily from their boughs in dark showers, drifting before the wind into all the crannies of pasture and wood. At dawn and twilight there were few bird-calls to be heard.

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Bright-feathered creatures had taken flight for the South; and the sparrows settled down to their long, undisputed reign. The melancholy month, the dreariest of the year, was at hand. And, at its coming, Virginia gave herself up to the gray mood.

An anniversary, the saddest in Virginia's sad calendar, was approaching: the date of her baby's death: the real beginning of the breaking up of her married life. As Virginia dwelt, in thought, upon this day, she was filled, more than ever before, with bitter regret that the innocent life had not been spared to her. She felt again, more deeply than of old, that, could her child have lived, her own life might have remained guiltless and pure. Then, in a sudden flash, there came another wish, which she had not considered before: a right wish, a saving wish: the desire for other children. With them, it seemed to her, lay her one hope of joy and salvation. And the coming of this thought was the vanguard of the victorious army.

Shall I, shall anyone, reveal the field of that last struggle: that final battle between Virginia's memories and the new perceptions of right and duty? It is sacred ground, and may not be studied with uncomprehending eyes. Too many cherished dead are buried on that field: —a great guilt, a mighty love, innumerable heartaches, yearnings, rebellions: all the children of loneliness. But, these finally gone, Virginia's soul was purified, as by fire, and prepared for the strange impulse which, so quickly and so unexpectedly, brought about the end.

On the morning of Wednesday, November the eighth,

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Virginia woke with a heavy sense of oppression that was neither to be defined nor shaken off by rising and breakfast. Till noon she idled about the tiny house, taking up a bit of work and putting it away again, opening a book, and finding herself unable to keep her thoughts on any stupid hero or vapid heroine. Yet her thoughts, which she strove in vain to command, would do nothing but return to an old, suddenly-strengthened but long threshed-out subject: an overpowering dread of the approaching winter: such a dread as she remembered to have felt only in the first year of her marriage, when, upon her pitiable ignorance, had dawned the unavoidable mystery of Motherhood.

By noon she was struggling to overcome this dread; but by the time that her dreary luncheon was finished she felt that only physical fatigue could master the morbidness of her mental state. Thus, entirely without premonition of the outcome, she prepared herself for the walk that was to lead her back into the world.

She left the cottage, at a little before two o'clock, clad in a short skirt and a rough jacket, with a small toque pinned close to her head. It was a typical November day. Any momentary suggestion of blue in the sky was speedily covered with layers of scurrying, heavy-fringed clouds, driven by a wild wind that was rushing down from the North in great, fresh gusts. Once on the high-road Virginia turned, instinctively, Northward; her mood craving a struggle with the elements. And the more savagely she was buffeted by the wind the higher did her spirits rise, in excitement at the contest. She had

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gone a mile, possibly more, before she became vaguely conscious of a new purpose in her progress: a purpose grown, somehow, out of the direction in which she was walking. But she was at least three miles from Thompson's, and it was past three o'clock, before she knew that she was going on to Grangeford: that she was going to her husband's house; and that her heart was suddenly filled with a boundless relief, a high, surging happiness.

In the succeeding mile, however, fatigue began to come upon her. She was, by spells, pantingly hot and shiveringly cold. And she knew well that she had gone less than a third of the distance. Yet easier, a hundred times, to go the whole, weary eight miles, breasting the wild wind, with hope and life ahead of her, than to turn back, along the easy road, to the old, deadening isolation. So far had Virginia advanced in knowledge of the Laws of Life that the hard was become easy, by reason of sure reward.

Two more slow and weary miles, that took her the best part of an hour to accomplish, and she was obliged to stop entirely, and sit down by the roadside, with her back against a sheltering tree. She hated herself for her lack of endurance, begrudging each second of delay. In the end, however, her halt proved to be time gained. For presently, from the South, came a ponderous farm wagon, driven by a neighbor of Thompson's, who knew the lady by sight and offered her a lift, which she took, suddenly perceiving Fate to be with her.

It was ten minutes past five when the driver of her slow but merciful equipage set her down, on the out-

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skirts of Grangeford, with a gruff and friendly word of farewell. It was with a sudden sensation of anxiety, centred in a whole tumult of undefined emotions, that she began her walk through the town, starting at the far end of the James Road. The gathering dusk proved a shelter from recognition: and she gazed with a beating heart at the lights appearing, one by one, in the windows of the comfortable, old-fashioned houses bordering the street on either side. They bred a yearning in Virginia's heart: a longing for "home," for tenderness, for—care, and love, and a new place among people. As she went along wrapped in these gentle thoughts, she was passed by Marion Hunt, who, seated in a surrey, was being driven rapidly down the street, in the direction of her home. Marion had not seen her. But the glimpse suddenly shattered all the brightness of Virginia's dreams, and plunged her back into a ferment of doubt and dread.

It was a quarter to six when the young woman reached the top of the hill which was crowned by the Van Studdiford house. How familiar it looked, looming up through the semi-darkness! How she recognized every stone and tile, every angle and jut, that formed it! The library was lighted.—Charles was in, then!—And the room over the drawing-room, that which had been the nursery,—why was there a light in that?—Ah, well, she should soon know, now. And as, lingering a little, she passed into the grounds, ghosts of memory thronged close about her, and there were tears in her eyes as well as in her heart.



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When she had ascended the veranda steps Virginia did not ring the bell. She did not care to be received by Carson. She would go at once to Charles, in the library.—It had been better, no doubt, had she reconciled herself to the usual form. Yet in this, also, Fate was perhaps her guide. As she reentered the hall the lights were suddenly turned up, and, dishevelled by the wind, weary, bewildered as she was, she found herself face to face with a tall, magnificently formed woman, clad in a clinging, décolleté gown of jet.

Virginia started back. For an instant the other also stared, amazement and displeasure mingling in her face. Then her lip curled, she half frowned half laughed, and all at once disappeared into the library, leaving Virginia, dazed and helpless, in the hall.

Almost immediately the library door re-opened and Van Studdiford came out. The door banged behind him, and he advanced, his eyes shining.

“ You! ” he cried. “ You have really—”

But Virginia broke in upon him. “ Who— ” she caught her breath, “ who is that woman? —Who is she, —Charles? ”

Her husband’s expression was one of despair, and all the abundant color had left his face. Yet he answered, almost at once, quietly: “ Her name is Howard. Muriel Howard.”

“ But—but—but— ” Virginia stammered, wildly, and then stopped. Her chaos was a new one, now.

Van Studdiford had retreated to the library door and stood with his back against it, as if to protect her from

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what was within. His hands, with an attempt at nonchalance, were thrust in his pockets. His feet were spread wide. He regarded Virginia steadily, with an inward tremor of mingled joy and dread.

After a moment she gathered herself up, with a pitiable attempt at dignity in the midst of her overpowering weariness. "But of course—we—I am sorry—we cannot both of us stay here.—I—" her thoughts had leaped swiftly to the truth, but she was too tired now to feel anything keenly. "I—will go back—"

"No, Virginia!" Charles sprang forward again. "For God's sake, no!—You—shall not meet. I will arrange everything.—She shall go, at once."

But Virginia's expression did not brighten. She seemed to wave his words aside. "How long, Charles,—oh Heavens!—how long has she—"

"About six months," he answered, sternly forcing himself to the truth.

There was a silence. Virginia stood gazing into space, her face so wan, so white, that Charles' heart ached for her, and throbbed with fury at himself. Her coming had been joyous. But now, already, her plans, her hopes, her dreams, lay all about her, a dreadful wreck. Yet she could still think. Indeed, at this moment, it seemed as if, in spite of everything, the acutest understanding had been given her. While she stood staring at and beyond her husband, the horror slowly faded from her eyes. After all—she had given him cause. More. She had once let him live in that very house with —Ah! He did not ask so much of her! And—if he

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were to blame as much as she—would it not be easier for both——”

He began, at this point, to read her thoughts. It seemed as if the life in him were renewed. “Virginia!” he said, softly, “you will stay?”

She had never dreamed that there could be such appeal in his voice. “You—want me?” Actually, she could almost smile.

“Want you!—Before God—I—always have!”

Still, for a few seconds, she hesitated, fighting back the renewed impulse to rush away, into the night, into oblivion and that darkness of which she had such bitter cognizance. Ah! What was hidden by the library door could never be so dreadful as that!

And so, all at once, Charles’ perfected vision was hers also. There descended about her a wonderful light of peace and promise. Through it the future shone, clear and smiling. The gray shroud of uncertainty melted away. She and Charles, a little older, gray, perhaps, were there, in a picture, with their children, boys and girls, grouped about them. She moved her eyes to the face of the actual Charles, and smiled, but spoke not, because of the tears that were so imminent. Then, unsteadily, but with a proud heart, she moved toward the stairs, reached them, looked back once, and finally, *her hand on the rail, though her feet dragged, she drew herself, step by step, to the top.*

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THE END











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